



HM Prison &  
Probation Service



# **COVID-19 Research & Evaluation (CoRE) Programme: Final Report**

## **The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Youth Custody Services.**

October 2022

Professor Neal Hazel, Alisa Purton  
& YCS Psychology Services

# OFFICIAL

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# YCS CoRE Programme: Final Report

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# YCS CoRE Programme: Final Report

## Foreword

The publication of this final report from our CoRE Programme coincides with exactly three years since the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 an international public health emergency on 30 January 2020. In the weeks that followed, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and the UK experienced its first lockdown, with individuals and organisations responding to the challenges this brought.

At the outset of the pandemic, the Youth Custody Service (YCS) quickly recognised the considerable impact COVID-19 restrictions were likely to have on our staff, partners, and most importantly on those children in our care.

Working with our own Psychology Services and under the independent direction of Professor Neal Hazel, we put in place this research programme to consider the pandemic's impact and examine the experiences of those involved with the children's secure estate in England and Wales from March 2020 and throughout that year.

While this report brings together all the programme's findings in one place for the first time, I've been struck by how much these have helped inform our care for children throughout this period and beyond. For example, in response to the experiences shared, we have taken, and will continue to take, steps to increase the purposeful activity offer to children and consider individual needs. Our new education service will be needs-led and give education providers freedom to innovate and tailor to children's needs.

I would like to thank all those who cooperated with this research and contributed to making these findings so comprehensive. This includes the children and young people in our care, their families, parents and carers as well as our dedicated partners and external supporters. I'm particularly grateful to the hard-working staff in our secure settings, many of whom continued to work on the frontline at a time of great national turmoil. I'm proud of the compassion and care they've shown.

The fact that this report draws on such a range of experiences, depth of insight and methodologically sound data is testament to the YCS CoRE Programme team. I also thank them for their efforts on this significant piece of work and the impact it's had. I give particular thanks to Professor Neal Hazel.

I'm pleased that many findings within this report confirm that most children and staff felt protected and supported by the public health measures in place and our response to the pandemic. I'm also motivated by this unique opportunity to learn and improve, building on our commitment to deliver better outcomes for children in our care.

**Ed Cornmell**

**Executive Director, Youth Custody Service**

**January 2023**

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This is the collective report for the YCS COVID-19 Research and Evaluation (CoRE) Programme, exploring the experiences of those involved with the children's secure estate in England and Wales during first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the spring and summer of 2020. The report collates the experiences of children and staff from across the three types of custodial sites: Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), Secure Training Centres (STCs), and Secure Children's Homes (SCHs). These are contextualised with the reflections of parents and carers, senior leaders in sites and Youth Custody Service (YCS) Headquarters, and external stakeholders (including governance bodies, representative organisations, and contracted service providers).

### Research Methods

The experiences of children and staff were collected between July and November 2020.

Children's experiences were collected using a survey questionnaire and follow-up qualitative interviews. The Child Survey collected quantitative and qualitative data through phone/video/face-to-face interviews (34 mins average) in the three weeks between 22 July and 12 August 2020. Researchers interviewed 391 children, with a 67% response rate of a census of eligible children across the three types of custodial site, in proportions closely reflecting the total custodial population. Follow-up qualitative interviews with a purposive sample of 32 children from across all three types of site were conducted by phone/face-to-face in October and November 2020.

Staff experiences were collected using an online self-completion survey and follow-up qualitative interviews. The Staff Survey was a census collating experiences from across youth custody services in the month from 17 July 2020 to 17 August 2020, completed by 1220 staff. 55% of staff were usually based in YOIs, 19% in SCHs, 16% in STCs, and 10% in their organisations' central offices. Follow-up qualitative interviews with a purposive sample of 20 staff from across sites and headquarters were conducted by phone/face-to-face during September 2020.

Parents' and carers' reflections were collected using phone qualitative interviews with a purposive sample of 16 parents/carers of 15 children from across all three site types between September 2020 and November.

Senior leaders' reflections were collected using phone/video interviews with a purposive sample of 18 leaders (six from YCS Executive Leadership Team [ELT], six YOI Governors, two STC Directors, four SCH Managers) between October and December 2020.

External stakeholders' reflections were collected using phone/video interviews with a purposive sample of 15 organisations (three public sector service providers, five third sector service providers, five governance bodies, two representative organisation) between October and November 2020.

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## Public Health

### Children

Although a minority of children were worried about catching COVID-19, most felt well protected (77%) and supported (85%) by public health measures and staff in custody. Feeling protected depended on children knowing what rules to follow and confidence in staff addressing their concerns. Most children (64%) felt that they had a part to play in public health protection, which depended statistically on having a sense of cultural unity. This cultural unity and feelings of safety could be undermined by resentment if they felt staff were not following public health rules.

A substantial minority of children in custody spent time in isolation on a Reverse Cohorting Unit (RCU) (42%). Just over half found it stressful (56%), but a large majority felt supported through the experience (83%), which depended on feeling that staff took their public health concerns seriously and they had their basic needs met (including physical exercise). Some children preferred being on the RCU (14%), as it could mean a break from wider site relations. RCU staff felt that children were well cared for, but had concerns that the isolation would negatively affect children's health and development.

Parents and carers felt that children were safe and relatively protected from the pandemic while in custody. They were generally supportive of the public health restrictions but had concerns about time in isolation and the lack of development work. There was a mixed picture about how well they felt informed by sites.

Senior leaders widely considered that children had been successfully protected during the early months of the pandemic. They considered the public health policies and procedures to be sound, but they were concerned about staff not implementing procedures and the physical environment in some sites making physical distancing difficult. They had a clear sense that RCUs had played a key role in managing health risk but were concerned about the extent of regime restrictions involved and the effect on children's wellbeing.

External stakeholders also considered that the YCS and sites had succeeded in public health during the pandemic's early months, when the initial risk to children was potentially high. Like senior leaders, staff, and parents, they had unease about the operation of RCUs and the potential effect on children's mental health.

### Staff

Four out of five staff continued to work in their usual workplace during the early months of the COVID-19 restrictions (82%), with the figure rising to nine in ten staff who work directly with children (90%). Three-quarters had needed to self-isolate at some point by mid-summer 2020 (77%).

A substantial minority of staff who continued to work in sites during the early months of the pandemic were concerned with the real risk of infection at work (40%). This was more likely if they were in a vulnerable group, or they lacked confidence in management support. However, most staff in their usual workplace felt as protected as possible (68%), predicted by whether

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they felt appropriate public health measures were in place and again confidence in management support/communication. Most staff at work were satisfied with hygiene and distancing measures (69%), but concerns included colleagues flouting rules and their work not feeling conducive to the rules.

The large majority of staff felt a strong sense of cultural unity in dealing with the pandemic (86%), stressing the part that children played. Almost all at work were clear that they knew the public health rules (95%), again with the theme that this relied on management support/communication.

A quarter of staff in sites had worked in RCUs (25%), of which a substantial minority found worrying (48%) and stressful (39%), although most felt supported (77%).

Senior leaders considered that there was enough communication about public health (with the possible exception of action required for those particularly vulnerable), although SCH and STC leaders complained that it was often written inappropriately for their sites.

## Mental Wellbeing

### Children

The large majority of children across youth custody felt that they coped well (94%), and that lockdown had been “fine” for them (81%), and most even found some positives (55%). However, almost half found the lockdown situation difficult at times (47%). A substantial minority were more anxious (24%) or miserable (42%) at times because of lockdown, and almost a third often felt alone (31%). How easy or difficult a child found this period largely depended significantly on: how tough they found visitor restrictions, having enough contact with family, having access to activities, supportive staff, a culture/environment quiet enough to sleep, and whether they had additional health/learning needs.

Nevertheless, most children felt supported during the pandemic, with three-quarters finding it easy to speak to someone about how they were feeling (77%). Feeling supported was predicted by family contact, having encouraging staff relations, but also having a sense of agency.

Site staff were concerned about the effect on children’s wellbeing of regime restrictions and interruptions to criminal cases. However, they noted reduced self-harm and violence, which they related to feeling safer through smaller residential groups and a calmer regime.

Parents and carers also generally felt that children had coped well with public health restrictions, including prolonged periods in their rooms. However, some parents described their children having less confidence, being unsettled, or distressed. Parents themselves found that not being able to visit their children made their custody absence harder to deal with, although regular communication/support from staff made this easier.

Senior leaders were conscious that children with particularly complex needs may find lockdown even harder, and there was concern about the balance between public health and mental wellbeing.



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External stakeholders were similarly concerned that the immediate public health priority had led to insufficient focus on children's mental wellbeing. Stakeholder opinions differed on whether lockdown caused acute mental health challenges. However, they saw essential safeguarding processes still operational and an increasing child-centred approach across the estate. There was widespread disappointment at the failure of the Ministry of Justice's early release scheme to allow children home, with some seeing this as an example of children suffering from adult-focused policymaking.

## Staff

Most staff showed resilience (89% coped "pretty well") and even saw positives in the lockdown situation (85%). However, about a third were feeling more miserable (30%) and concerned with their stress levels (35%) at working in the pandemic. The most consistent predictors for staff positive wellbeing and coping during lockdown were whether they were worried about public health arrangements, achieving a positive work-life balance, and support/communication from managers. Positive work-life balance depended on management support/communications and changes in working arrangements. Headquarters staff found remote working beneficial to their wellbeing and work-life balance, but negative pressures came from home responsibilities and increased management expectations (real or perceived). For site staff, pressures came from extra work covering isolating colleagues. The large majority of staff were satisfied with wellbeing support (82%), predicted by whether managers would take their public health concerns seriously and communicate well with them.

Senior leaders recognised that working through the pandemic, particularly during outbreaks, was stressful and draining for staff, and that their resilience was waning over time. Senior leaders were negative about how they had managed their own workload and mental health during the pandemic, with particular stress from political pressures and responsibility for others' lives at this time. There was a theme of not feeling able to access support.

## Safety and Behaviour

### Children

The large majority of children across the secure estate felt safe from others' harm (not including infection risk) during the first months of lockdown. Substantially fewer children than before the pandemic felt unsafe (6%) or felt victimised by other children (8%) or staff (6%). More time spent in their rooms was not significantly related to increased feelings of safety. Children felt unsafe if they had felt victimised (by children or staff), but this was mediated by feeling cared for by somebody. In turn, feeling victimised was more likely if the child had personal vulnerabilities, and mediated by considering there was easy access to someone who would listen (family, support service or supportive staff). Significantly more children than before the pandemic felt able to report victimisation from peers or staff (49%), depending on how easy they could find someone to speak with and if they found staff supportive in their journey.

Children felt that lockdown acted as a circuit break from a negative/violent culture. Reorganising children into smaller single-figure 'family' groups (as lockdown 'bubbles') had improved peer relations and relieved the need for hypervigilance. Any conflict was felt to mainly escalate from "shout outs" after prolonged periods in rooms.

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Most children made a special effort to avoid trouble at this time (68%), predicted by an increased sense of cultural unity, feeling a personal role in public health, and encouragement from staff. Positive reinforcement from staff in YOIs was experienced by double the proportion of children compared to before the pandemic, and this was prominent in children's narratives about improved behaviour.

Parents/carers also generally felt that their children were more protected from others during lockdown, citing being in their rooms and the small groups. Senior leaders also considered that the increased safety was down to a change in relationship dynamics in sites (particularly YOIs), resulting from the move to single-figure 'family' groups. External stakeholders also shared the view that children were safer from violence during the pandemic because of the small groups, allowing more positive child-staff relationships and discipline.

Senior leaders welcomed the suspension of the incentives and privileges scheme for behaviour; although some staff were taking time to adjust, the shift to a more child-centred disciplinary approach was already beneficial.

## Staff

Most staff who worked with children felt safe from harm (70%). Feeling safe consistently depended on having positive relationships with children, but also positive relationships with colleagues, their role (actual and perceived), and how supported they felt. Conversely, feeling less safe was predicted by having poorer relationships with children, considering their role to be disciplinarian, and feeling that managers did not support them. Staff credited their increased feelings of safety surrounding improved relationships to a slower regime and, like others, to the reorganisation of children into small 'family' groups, which meant children were less hypervigilant and so allowed for their constructive interaction.

## Regimes and Activities

### Children

Most children across the secure estate spent more than two hours a day out of their room on weekdays (59%), but only a third did so at weekends (34%). Both were significantly lower during early lockdown months than before the pandemic (in YOIs and STCs). Children were less likely to spend time out of rooms if in a YOI or if staff were less able to be responsive. Although, at first, the extra time in rooms offered a break from the institutional culture, it then led to boredom, frustration and isolation. Nevertheless, most children considered they had enough activities in their rooms (69%), and this was predicted by having more contact with family, encouraging staff, productive activities helping development, and being older.

Most children felt that they had good access to some activities outside their room (61%), although this was more likely with children not in a YOI, those with positive staff relationships, and if well-established in custody. Almost all children were able to shower daily (99%) and spend time in the fresh air (92%), usually to exercise – a significantly greater proportion than before the pandemic – but this was still experienced as limited and subject to change. The large majority of children felt they had enough clothes (92%) and food (80%) – significantly more than before the pandemic (in YOIs and STCs). Most felt they had enough exercise (82%), but a

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substantial minority were feeling “really unfit” (39%), predicted by less access to activities and feeling unable to access healthcare. Restrictions to gym activities caused particular frustration. Most children with specific healthcare problems felt they had received the help needed (78%) - again, improved from pre-pandemic levels in YOIs and STCs.

Between the start of the pandemic and the beginning of August, only about half of children across the secure estate had any access to classroom-based education (52%). Although education provision clearly varied across site type, consistent predictors of education provision ran across all children’s experiences – how full the regime was generally, whether there was active case management, and how long a child had been in custody. Only half of children experienced receiving any encouragement from staff to engage with education (58%) (lower in YOIs than before lockdown). Only about a third received help from staff with education outside the classroom (37%). When encouragement and support was noted, it tended to be from education professionals coming onto residential units.

Parents/carers described their children’s frustration from being isolated in their rooms and felt that activities outside of rooms were too limited and not meaningful, but also noted the new and unexpected interests developed by children in their rooms (and how staff facilitated these). Similarly, parents were concerned with limited and inappropriate education, but (like children) felt that the less formal structure could allow children to focus on studies more relevant to them.

Staff differed on how restrictions had impacted on children. Some felt that restrictions on children had been minimised, that quality of time out of rooms was more important than quantity, and that children preferred and benefited from a reduced formal regime (but with more informal interactions). Others felt that children were in their rooms too long, with too few activities. The large majority of staff considered that children’s best interests were always a primary consideration (90%), but there were concerns about the pressures on this from public health restrictions and industrial relations.

Both senior leaders and external stakeholders considered that children in YOIs spent too much time in their rooms for too long a period over Summer 2020, with both groups recognising this was difficult to improve while classroom education was suspended. Both groups also had a subsidiary theme that it was better to have children out for relatively less time if that time was spent constructively, also recognising the logistical problem of having children out of rooms for longer if in smaller groups rather than all at once. Both groups also felt that more could have been done to facilitate fuller regimes earlier in YOIs and STCs, including use of gyms.

Senior leaders and stakeholders were frustrated that classroom education was not available sooner in YOIs, contrasted to SCHs and vulnerable children in the community. Concurring with staff, both groups widely considered the delay to be driven by the needs of the adult estate rather than children’s needs. While SCH staff were seen as flexible in adapting education provision, senior leaders elsewhere were concerned that residential staff were not enabled to be proactive in out-of-classroom education. External stakeholders praised efforts to provide in-room education and activities but felt these needed to be more constructively aligned with their interests and plans.

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## Staff

The large majority of staff considered that regimes were appropriately restricted (82%), and easing at the right rate (71%), depending on their confidence in public health and satisfactory management communication. The large majority considered that their workplace had coped well during lockdown (91%), depending on levels of management support, their own circumstances, and if they also considered that children had always been the primary consideration.

The large majority of staff working under a centralised HM Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) Gold Command Structure considered it needed (90%), although there were mixed feelings about whether it made running sites easier (44%) or harder (21%). Staff, senior leaders, and external stakeholders widely saw the Gold Command structure as restricting in its ability to meet children's specific needs, with senior leaders having similar concerns around the "bureaucratic" Exceptional Delivery Model process planning the easing of restrictions.

## Relationships and Culture

### Children

The large majority of children across the secure estate felt they were getting on fine with their peers while in custody during COVID-19 (92%). However, there was a mixed picture as to whether children considered peer relationships had actually improved compared with before the pandemic – most felt they stayed the same, with almost equal numbers improving (18%) and getting worse (17%). Children widely attributed any improvements in relationships to the smaller 'family groups', allowing them to be less vigilant and giving them time to develop understanding (as they had also reported doing with staff). Conversely, some children could feel "stuck" in family groups, leading to frustrations and even misbehaviour to develop some agency.

The large majority of children across the secure estate experienced positive relationships with staff (92%) and felt cared for by most staff (80%), which improved substantially compared with before the pandemic. Staff were felt to be more encouraging, responsive, caring, respectful, and supportive for the future. Whether children saw relationships with staff positively depended on: feeling treated as an individual; positive behaviour encouragement; and whether staff helped them prepare for the future. In turn, the key predictors for a child feeling *treated as an individual* were (again) behaviour encouragement, being allowed everyday choices, and having enough activities from which to choose. Children felt more able to seek help with a problem if staff had given them positive behaviour encouragement. Positive relationships with staff were credited to the smaller 'family' groups, by enabling more personal interaction that allowed them to know each other as individuals and leaving children more likely to turn to staff for help. Children felt less cared for (or even discriminated against) if they considered that staff depersonalised them or did not respond appropriately to their need (for example, to room call bells).

Although most children felt that any complaints would be dealt with fairly (72%), there was clear concern that this was undermined by their relative powerlessness in the face of staff culture.

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Unfairness was perceived particularly from children with poor relationships with staff (including feeling victimised) and children from Black and other ethnic minority backgrounds.

The large majority of children felt able to speak to an advocate (86%, significantly more than before the pandemic), although there were mixed experiences of actually managing to make contact. While appreciating phone contact with other external professionals (particularly positive support around behaviour and resettlement), children noted the limitations on building trust virtually.

Most children found the prohibited/limited family visits difficult emotionally (63%), particularly as many were really worried about their families in the pandemic (48%). Even when operating, restrictions to physical contact were hard. However, almost all children considered their contact with families (mostly every day) to be “enough” (94%), depending on whether they had good phone access and if they were enabled to have a positive focus on their future while in custody. Phone access was significantly higher than before the pandemic in YOIs, which helped children manage their emotions. Conversely, reductions in credit and technical/procedural limitations to phone access added to children’s stress. A significant minority of children took part in video calls (38%), predicted by whether they already had regular phone contact with the outside world, site logistics, and reported supportive relationships with staff.

Parents and carers noted how the loss of visits had impacted on family relationships, but they described how increased telephone contact with children had helped them cope with this loss. Parents could sometimes find children’s increased phone contact demands problematic. Parents had concerns that phone contact may have been limited as part of behaviour management. They welcomed video calls, although there were frustrations around technology and concerns around privacy.

Almost half of staff working in secure estate sites considered that children’s peer relations had improved from before the pandemic (48%) (just 8% considered them worse), predicted by working in a YOI and also seeing better staff-child relationships. Senior leaders were clear that the move to smaller ‘family’ groups had improved relationships between children.

Senior leaders were frustrated that family/professional visits did not restart sooner, but there was strong approval for having facilitated children’s increased telephone contact. Video calls were also welcomed and seen to indicate how technology could be developed and used further in the children’s secure estate.

External stakeholders also considered that the loss of visits in YOIs during the initial lockdown may have been unnecessarily restrictive. There was praise for the increased ability of children to have telephone contact with families, but questioning of why phone credit is limited given the wellbeing and resettlement benefits. There was also praise for the development of video calls, but with some arguing its delay illustrated a lack of dexterity in HMPs for meeting children’s specific needs. This related to a broader theme among stakeholders that the position of YCS within HMPs had restricted its flexibility to sufficiently support the needs of children during the pandemic.



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## Staff

Almost half of those working in residential sites felt that relationships between staff and children were better than usual (48%) (only a small proportion considered them worse), with a narrative around having more meaningful interactions with a slower regime and family groups, a sense of cultural unity, and staff taking a parent/carer role. Almost all staff working directly with children described having good relationships with them during the pandemic (98%). The only factor significantly predicting staff having good relationships with children was if they enjoyed helping them with their development (28 times more likely).

Almost all staff had positive relationships with colleagues during the early months of the pandemic (97%), with themes of increased support, understanding, and improved communication (within teams and with others) despite restrictions. Experiences varied around workplace culture and morale, with improvement or decline depending on factors including sense of job purpose and management communication. There was a strong narrative around improved team-spirit, bonded through common pressures – but some resentment from site staff both towards colleagues who were isolating/shielding and partner agencies who withdrew during lockdown. Senior leaders echoed that there was more camaraderie between staff members, including leadership teams, albeit with a concern that this may be waning over an extended pandemic.

Most staff were satisfied with interactions and communications with managers (72%), with a substantial minority noting improvements from before the pandemic (33%). Although there was a theme of feeling more “connected” to managers, who seemed more available at this time, junior staff were more likely to feel uninformed and not listened to. Female staff were also less likely to feel morale had improved or having been kept informed by management.

Senior leaders considered that caring child-staff relationships had been enabled by the smaller groups, which allowed staff to feel safer, less stressed, and interact with children as children (rather than as people detained in custody). There was also a sense that child-staff relationships had benefitted from the move away from a formal Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme and adjudications, towards more constructive behaviour management. External stakeholders also saw an improvement in relations between children and staff, particularly in YOIs, again citing the effect of introducing the smaller ‘family’ groups.

## Roles and Development

### Children

More than two-thirds of children across the secure estate experienced personal growth during the pandemic (68%), and about half were proud of something they had done in that time (52%). Personal growth depended on a sense of achievement, supported by encouraging staff. Most children considered that taking some responsibility during the pandemic helped them grow as a person (61%). In YOIs specifically, children considered that the lockdown had enabled this personal growth by offering space from an intensive culture.

Almost half of all children experienced pro-social identity development (“I’ve become a better person”) (48%), critical to positive child outcomes after custody - which depended on having

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access to activities, personal achievement, and progress in preparing for release. Most children felt that a staff member had been proud of something they had done (53%), which will help foster pro-social identity development.

Just under half of children had learned knowledge/skills they felt would be helpful after release (43%), which was predicted by having resettlement preparation, family contact, encouraging staff, and feeling engaged with the regime.

Only a third of children considered that staff had helped them prepare to leave custody, and half experienced help that would support them to desist from offending. Lockdown interrupted resettlement, with fewer children aware of sentence plans (in YOIs/STCs), and progress disrupted by restrictions to education and temporary release. Almost two-thirds of all children were able to work towards their own future goals (64%), which again depended on encouraging staff and support from within the site or from the community – disadvantaging children who had been previously been in the care of children's services.

Parents and carers found contrasting support from sites in their own efforts to encourage their children's development. Both parents/carers and external stakeholders were concerned that the restrictions had reduced support for resettlement and transitions. External stakeholders were also concerned that the pandemic had disrupted the development of more effective personal casework support in line with Constructive Resettlement.

## Staff

Almost all staff involved with delivering the children's secure estate had to adapt to new work roles or responsibilities during the early months of the pandemic (92%), often including additional tasks (for example, cleaning). More found the situation worse (32%) than found it better (17%), depending on factors like relations/communications with colleagues and management, work-life balance, and workplace culture.

There was a theme from staff of personal or professional growth, improved by new tasks/roles. However, a reduced role due to restrictions could bring less satisfaction, feeling undervalued, and a sense of disorientation about their purpose.

Three-quarters of staff working with children felt that they provided a parent/carer role during this time (75%), with almost half of those doing so more than usual (45%) – predicted by whether they enjoyed supporting child development. Half of staff felt they provided a disciplinarian role (56%), but a third felt they had done this less during the pandemic (36%). This shift to more of a parent/carer role was not welcomed by all staff in YOIs, with a subsidiary theme of feeling disempowered from being "prison officers".

Senior leaders considered that staff had developed a clearer sense of purpose around increasing their role of parent/carer during the pandemic. This shift was seen as positive and in line with broader staff development and culture aims. External stakeholders also welcomed this shift, aided by the move to smaller 'family' groups, as in line with the need for a workforce focused on childcare, and a YCS guided by the Child First principle.

Senior leaders hoped that the pandemic had highlighted the peculiarity of the children's estate within HMPPS, with the voice of the YCS now being heard more. External stakeholders similarly

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supported the YCS to develop its voice and identity to ensure that the specific needs of children were met.

## CoRE Programme strategic messages for ‘building back better’

1. Being in smaller ‘family’ groups (of single figures) can help children feel safer (and bring other benefits), particularly in YOI cultures.

**Recommendation 1:** YCS to consider whether small ‘family’ groups can work logistically and safely post-pandemic or, alternatively, how the conditions needed to retain their benefits can be replicated.

2. Positive child experiences in custody require constructive relationships with staff based on a childcare role.

**Recommendation 2:** YCS to ensure recruitment, training and ongoing professional development enables and motivates staff working directly with children to fulfil a ‘parent/carer’ role.

3. Children benefit from the opportunity, space and support to develop from both formal and informal learning which is relevant to personal growth.

**Recommendation 3:** YCS to provide all children with opportunities for development of skills and knowledge aligned to individual needs and interests via a constructive plan which includes supported learning beyond the classroom.

4. Prioritising the needs of children in decision-making is an important direction for policymakers.

**Recommendation 4:** HMPs and the Ministry of Justice to review how YCS can fulfil its duties to prioritise the specific needs and best interests of children whilst in its current organisational position.



# YCS CoRE Programme: Final Report

## 1. Introduction

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This is the collective report for YCS COVID-19 Research and Evaluation (CoRE) Programme, exploring the impact and subsequent experiences of those involved with the children's secure estate in England and Wales during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the spring and summer of 2020.

### **The children's secure estate**

A part of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), YCS manages the four public sector YOIs and is responsible for commissioning and contract managing the private sector sites. YCS aims to create a safe, decent and nurturing environment that provides outstanding levels of care and support for all children in custody and consists of:

- Five Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) – four public and one privately managed
- Two Secure Training Centres (STCs) – both privately managed
- Eight Secure Children's Homes (SCHs) – managed by local authorities

The children's secure estate accommodates 10 to 17-year-olds sentence or remanded to custody in England and Wales, in addition to 18-year-olds awaiting transfer to adult custody or release. On the last day of March 2020, the secure estate custody population (including 18-year-olds) was 815.

### **Challenges and changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic**

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic presented a substantial public health risk to the children and staff across the children's secure estate. The large numbers of children living together close confinement, and the teams of staff working with them, provided conditions for a contagious disease to spread quickly and with the apparent potential for significant loss of life.

As in the outside community, the children's secure estate saw the introduction of public health restrictions for the first national lockdown in March 2020 in order to reduce physical contact and therefore the risk of infection. All sites introduced Exceptional Delivery Models (EDMs), although the nature, severity, and extent of restrictions differed across types of site and providers. Restrictions included: the introduction of Reverse Cohorting Units (RCUs), where children who had been exposed to the risk of infection (including new arrivals and those attending court) were isolated for fourteen days; suspension of personal and professional visits; suspension of temporary release arrangements; suspension or restricted classroom education; suspension or changes to support services and interventions. In addition, children were organised into small groups (known initially as "family groups") of single figures.

The lockdown period also saw the development of various initiatives to mitigate concerns associated with restrictions and associated increase in isolation, again varying across sites and providers. These included the suspension of behaviour management schemes, with children not able to lose 'privileges'. Children also had increased access to video games and numerous in-room activities including a bespoke weekly magazine with contributions from celebrities. A

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traffic light system was introduced to monitor the ongoing health and wellbeing status of children. Arrangements were made to facilitate virtual children's virtual contact with families and professionals, including for access to telephones and video calls.

Away from the establishment sites, staff who usually worked in their organisations' administrative offices ('headquarters') also saw restrictions and changes to working practices (along with others in the community), including the widespread development of remote working.

## About the CoRE programme

YCS COVID-19 Research and Evaluation (CoRE) Programme was a comprehensive programme of research and evaluation to capture and assess the experience of dealing with the threat of COVID-19 across the children's secure estate for England and Wales. Commissioned by the YCS Executive Director to inform YCS recovery from the pandemic, the CoRE Programme was undertaken by YCS Psychology Services led by Alisa Purton, under the independent direction of Professor Neal Hazel. It is the most extensive programme of research ever undertaken in children's custody in this country, producing learning to 'build back better' through recovery and beyond. From October 2020, the CoRE programme produced a series of 24 findings briefings for youth custody services to inform recovery work, in addition to bespoke analysis for specific operational queries. YCS Psychology Services staff continue to research data from the programme.

The programme was structured around a constructive "CAN-do" framework, which aimed to (1) **Capture** experiences of those involved with the children's secure estate, (2) **Assess** these experiences for enablers and barriers to positive outcomes, and (3) **Navigate** ongoing response, recovery for 'the new normal', and preparations for any future crises.

The programme captured the experiences and reflections of five stakeholder groups:

1. **Children:** across all site types, both remanded and sentenced
2. **Staff:** from across all site types and headquarters, and across all types of custody providers
3. **Senior leaders:** from site and headquarters management teams, across all types of custody providers
4. **Parents and carers:** of children in custody during the pandemic
5. **External stakeholders:** including service providers, governance bodies, and representative organisations

Primary data collection included **surveys** with 391 children and 1,221 staff (conducted in July to August 2020), and 100 **qualitative depth interviews** with the stakeholders from the above five groups (conducted in September to December 2020). The data captured experiences and reflections across six domains:

1. **Public health:** including safety from COVID-19, risk, distancing/hygiene measures, and reverse cohorting

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2. **Mental wellbeing:** including anxiety and sense of coping
3. **Safety and behaviour:** including levels of peace and safety from harm
4. **Relationships and culture:** including regime engagement, and relations between stakeholder groups
5. **Regimes and activities:** including access to basic provision, education, and leisure
6. **Roles and development:** including changes in roles and responsibilities, preparations for release, and personal/professional growth

Further details of the stakeholder groups, and methods of data collection and analysis are provided in the **Annex** to this report.

## About this report

This report is structured by the above six domains. Each findings chapter presents the corresponding experiences of children and staff from across the three types of custodial sites, which are then contextualised with the reflections of parents and carers, senior leaders, and external stakeholders.

The final chapter presents four CoRE strategic messages to be considered at a strategic level, together with corresponding recommendations.

## 2. Public Health

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This chapter explores concerns across the children's secure estate of the threat associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and how protected children and staff felt as a result of the public health measures established. It includes children's and staff concerns about COVID-19, how protected they felt, protective measures, support with their concerns, and levels of public health communication/information. It also explores experiences on Reverse Cohorting Units (RCUs), where children spent a period (normally 14 days) isolating when (re)arriving on site or having been at risk of infection. As with each chapter, children's and staff experiences are then contextualised with reflections from parents/carers, senior leaders, and external stakeholders.

### Children's experiences

#### Concerns about COVID-19

Of all children across the children's secure estate (N391), one in five (22%) were worried about catching COVID-19 in their site.

Not surprisingly, children were significantly more likely to be worried about their own safety if they were already **worried about the virus generally**, particularly if concerned for the health of family and friends. However, children also felt more worried about the virus if they were more **vulnerable in the site**, including feeling victimised by staff or children and not feeling cared for. Children who felt they had been victimised by other children during the pandemic were more than three and a half times as likely to be worried about catching COVID-19. A protective factor

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against feeling worried was simply feeling assured that any such COVID-19 **concerns would be taken seriously by staff**.

## Feeling protected

- Three-quarters of children (77%) felt as protected as possible from the virus.

The strongest significant predictors for feeling protected were clearly related to the staff public health response. Children were more than twenty times more likely to feel protected if they **knew what rules to follow to keep everyone safe** (knowing about the virus's dangers in itself was not independently significant). Similarly, children who felt that **staff would take their COVID-19 concerns seriously** were seven times more likely to feel protected. Feeling protected was also predicted by having **staff help them in their personal development**, such as preparation for release. Two variables focused on their family – having children and being worried about family health – predicted children feeling less protected.

A clear theme from children was that they were probably **safer from COVID-19 in custody**, a controlled environment with hygiene measures and fewer people, than in the community:

“It has definitely been safer in here than outside because when I was outside, because I was in an apprenticeship, I had to see random people. It would have been a high risk for being in contact with COVID.”

17-year-old, YOI

“I feel worried because of what is happening but not too worried because I know they are doing everything within the guidelines.”

16-year-old, YOI

“Quite protected I’m in jail, is less of a chance to come to come to jail. At the same time there’s a higher chance of it coming to jail, the officers go out and come back in everyday in it. I just have to pray and hope that they follow the government guidelines.”

17-year-old, YOI

Children saw **staff as the weak link** in their protection, coming in from the community (although recognised their protection efforts). This was particularly concerning for children who saw themselves at higher risk because of ethnicity or health concerns:

“Staff when they are touching things and searching you, they are not wearing gloves. And face mask is an issue because they don’t wear them. I understand young people can’t wear them. I’m worried because I’ve got asthma.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Only one group of people can potentially bring in the virus and that’s been officers, but they have been doing stuff so that we have been safer. One officer was staying on his own rather than living with his family so that he didn’t risk his spreading it to his family or us.”

18-year-old, YOI

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## Support with public health concerns

The large majority (85%) felt that any concerns they had about COVID-19 would be taken seriously by staff.

“They help you to the best of their ability and that they're supportive and that made sure that you you've got what you need to know if you've got any concerns and that about corona or anything like that.”

17-year-old, YOI

Significant predictors for children feeling their concerns would be taken seriously were being **able to draw on support**, having an **active regime**, and having **staff engaged in their personal development**. Being able to draw on support included non-staff; those feeling able to speak to an advocate when needed were more than three times as likely to feel that their COVID-19 concerns would be taken seriously by staff. Perhaps related to the importance of drawing on support, **foreign nationals** were significantly less likely to feel that their concerns would be taken seriously.

## The child's role in public health

During this time, almost two-thirds of children (64%) felt they **had a part to play** in protecting others from COVID-19. Significant predictors for children feeling they had an active role in public health protection were a sense of **cultural unity** (in it together), an **active regime** and resettlement support **helping make future plans** (perhaps increasing a sense of agency and social inclusion). Children who thought that staff and children were battling the pandemic together were five times as likely to feel they had an active part to play.

Children generally expressed understanding and appreciation for public health measures (and were keen for more access to hygiene products). There were **mixed views about communications** from sites, both about guidance and about test results, with a frustration at not getting more (and sooner):

“They could've communicated. When we were in our rooms for a few weeks and months, they could've communicated what was going on because we were in our rooms and not much information was being told. We was told we're not allowed to do certain things, but no reason was given... it was frustrating.”

18-year-old, SCH

“We knew about the coronavirus, that everything was going to be shut down obviously... But it would've been nice to have some sort of, like, guidance or reassurance that something's going to happen in the near future, or when it's going to happen, even if it's 2 months away (...) We all got tested and then it was just like a waiting game. They didn't come back to me and say you test negative, I just said to an officer 2/3 days later were there any cases of coronavirus? And they just said oh no they all came back negative. But I was thinking, why didn't you come back and tell us?”

16-year-old, YOI

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There was some concern about always being able to abide by public health rules in the circumstances. In particular, they were sceptical about **whether physical distancing was practical** in the custodial environment:

“So apparently, you have to stay away two metres from each other. But they say because in here it’s only a small place we try and do one metre.”

17-year-old, SCH

In relation to the importance of feeling that staff and children were battling the pandemic together, **resentment about staff** not operating under the same public health rules (or following them) was a very strong theme among children. The hurt at this perceived double-standard was felt particularly when comparing staff behaviour with restrictions between them and their family, and **undermined children’s commitment**, feeling that their public protection role mattered:

“The way staff are treating us - how they look at you - we have to follow rules which they don’t do: socially distance”

17-year-old, YOI

“When the officers went on their breaks, they all stand next to each other, but our families have to stay 2 metres apart - so I don't think the officers play their part.”

18-year-old, YOI

“Seeing officers on the unit laughing joking, touching each other and when we have a visit we have to stay away from our mum, brothers etc.”

16-year-old, STC

“What's the point of us social distancing but the staff don't really do it?”

17-year-old, YOI

There was also some **resentment about easing of restrictions** occurring sooner in the community than in custody:

“I think they could do more in general to follow the regime on the inside to what's going on outside like the gyms are opening outside but not in here. It's the same with education, it's not fair as I'm seeing schools reopening. I've been outside during COVID and there's a lot less intensity outside with the rules.”

16-year-old, YOI

## Reverse Cohorting Unit

Across the youth secure estate, two in five children (42%, n164) spent time isolating on a Reverse Cohorting Unit (RCU) in the early months of the pandemic (March to July/August 2020). The proportion of children spending time on an RCU varied by sector, with six in ten in SCHs (60%), almost five in ten children in STCs (48%), and four in ten in YOIs (40%).

Three quarters of children were on the RCU as new admissions (74%), with fewer having been to court (7%, n9) or for other logistical reasons (3%, n5) such as moving family groups. However, a small number spent time in the unit having been in contact with someone showing



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symptoms or testing positive for COVID-19 (10%, n16), developed symptoms themselves (6%, n9) or, reportedly in one case, having tested positive.

The majority (56%) of children spending time in an RCU found the **isolation stressful**, with one in eight children (12%) being worried about developing the virus.

The strongest predictor of being **worried about developing COVID-19** on the RCU was also being worried about the health of family and friends (9x more likely). There were also two factors related to the sites that reduced worry. First, considering that **staff had taken their concerns about COVID-19 seriously** saw children 85% less likely to be worried. Second, children experiencing **enough chances to get exercise** were 81% less likely to be worried.

A small proportion of children (14%) reported preferring being in the RCU. This was almost nine times more likely if the child felt they had been **victimised by staff** at some point during the pandemic, perhaps due to the routine, seclusion, or inconsistent staffing. If children received **educational support** from staff, they were also more likely to prefer the RCU environment.

The large majority of children (83%) felt **staff were supportive** whilst they were on the RCU. The significant predictors of considering staff as supportive focused on whether their needs were being met during the pandemic. The strongest factor was around their **health needs being met**, and particularly when assured that staff were concerned about public health and safety. As would be expected perhaps, if children felt staff would take their concerns seriously, they were almost twelve times more likely to feel staff were supportive on the RCU. The two other factors were related to the regime **meeting their basic needs** like enough food at mealtimes and **access to the regime activities** including enough exercise.

Children's stress on the RCU was primarily related to the **social isolation** itself, with the lack of face-to-face interaction and communication with others, particularly children associated with loneliness, sadness and boredom.

"Yeah [it was stressful because] we been locked up for too long. It affects me, like it makes me feel like, sad."

15-year-old, YOI

"Stressful - it was boring when I couldn't mix with anyone, only time I could chat to people was through their door, not the same."

17-year-old, YOI

The more positive aspects of the RCU experience focused primarily on it operating as respite and a **break from the culture** or relations in the rest of the site:

"Nice to have time, peace of mind and time to chill."

17-year-old, YOI

"I needed a break from everything from the outside - so it was helpful to begin with"

17-year-old, YOI

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A dominant theme was that children accepted and **appreciated the public health reasons** for being on the RCU:

“Because if you catch it from the outside, you wouldn't want anyone from here to catch it. So if you had it you wouldn't want to spread it other people. So I think that was a good thing.”

17-year-old, STC

Nevertheless, there was some **resentment** by children, with some sub-themes of it being unnecessary or long (particularly in STCs) or unfair when staff did not follow the same isolation guidelines:

“We have to go in isolation for 2 weeks but it's pointless because staff move around different units. But staff move around everywhere from an isolation unit to a unit, it's pointless, so if anyone had it, it would be round the centre anyway.”

17-year-old, STC

Reflecting quantitative findings, **whether they experienced the staff as sympathetic and attentive to their basic needs** was key to how supported children felt in the RCU:

“They still come and talk to you and make you feel comfortable and support you by doing your washing and making you food.”

17-year-old, STC

“When you press your bell and ask for something to get done, because you are isolating, they don't care about you. You have just got to be there. When you ask to speak to somebody, they say you've got COVID symptoms we don't want to speak to you. You are basically speaking to yourself. They don't give answers, they don't come back to you or anything. No communication. No support. A lack of information. I was demanding can I see the public health guideline rules and they just ignored me.”

18-year-old, YOI

Again, reflecting the quantitative findings, children also noted the importance of having access to **physical exercise** in coping with the stress of the RCU:

“First when we come here, it was so stressful, but then they allowed me to do some exercise, play ping pong and shower and my mind feels very comfortable. I don't feel anything now stressful any more.”

16-year-old, YOI

## Staff experiences

### Where staff worked during lockdown

Of all staff involved in running the children's secure estate (N1220 responses), four out of five (82%) worked in their usual workplace at some point during the early months of the COVID-19 restrictions (March to July 2020).



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The statistically significant predictors for staff continuing to work in their usual workplace were not surprising. The strongest significant predictor was the **type of workplace**, with on-site staff substantially more likely to continue there than headquarters staff. Staff were also more likely to continue working on the same site if they had an **operational role** and took on **additional responsibilities** (for example, Staff Care Team).

For those staff usually working directly with children, nine in ten (90%) continued working on the same site. Significant predictors for staff who work with children continuing in the same site were **working in an STC**, having an **operational role**, and not currently studying for qualifications.

More than three quarters of staff, (77%) had to **self-isolate** away from work for a time in the early months of restrictions (March to July 2020).

In (qualitative) discussions, staff who had changed to home/remote-working during the pandemic expressed how much difference this had made to them feeling safer (a point also explored in the Briefing on Staff Wellbeing). They recognised that their organisation had moved to remote working swiftly in order to keep them safe:

“I have at times been anxious/bored/concerned, however I believe that this would have been exacerbated had I been made to travel in to work, as some of my friends have in other parts of the Civil Service. Overall I'd rather feel safe.”  
Female, YCS HQ

“I think the way it has been handled really was good, we were sort of withdrawn quite early on which was good, like I felt quite valued, they wanted to keep us all safe.”  
Female, YOI

## Concerns about public health

Focusing on staff continuing to work in their usual place (not remote working; n994), two in five considered there to be **a ‘real risk’ of infection** in their workplace (40%). A similar proportion were ‘pretty worried’ about this possibility (43%).

The strongest predictors for these staff perceiving there to be a risk of infection were if they **usually worked with children** or had needed to **self-isolate** at some point. However, they were less likely to perceive a risk of infection if they considered that appropriate **COVID-19 measures** were in place, if they received appropriate **management support**, and if they experienced appropriate **management communication**.

The large majority of all staff (84%) reported that their Senior Managers took their concerns regarding COVID-19 seriously.

There was a strong theme from staff that any anxiety around infection tended to be general rather than focused on their workplace (related to feeling protected at work, explored later). But that also meant that staff were concerned about commuting to work (or, if working remotely, anxious about any return to commuting):

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“There was only as real a risk of catching COVID in [YOI] as there would be anywhere else. I haven't been specifically worried about catching COVID-19 at work, it is a general worry due to the fact I have kids so this would cover areas such as supermarkets and public transport too.”

Male, YOI

“I have real concern about travelling to Southern house by tram. The trams get very busy as you approach Croydon even if you travel in early. They are designed to carry large numbers of people in a confined space increasing the risk of COVID-19 transmission by an infected person.”

Female, YCS HQ

However, it was clear from staff that they were understandably more worried about the risk of infection at work if they were in a ‘vulnerable group’, such as having underlying health conditions or with a Black or other minority ethnicity:

“Due to being in a vulnerable category it is difficult not to worry about catching COVID at work due to the amount of staff, young people you can be in contact with.”

Female, SCH

“I feel vulnerable due to my ethnicity and I fear management will want to push me into attending the office instead of working from home which I am comfortable with until I have guarantees that I won't be at risk.”

Male, STC

As the above quotation suggests, and as indicated in quantitative findings, the level of staff worry clearly related to their confidence in management support. Staff who felt that their concerns were not taken seriously referred to questions not being answered properly, and feeling that managers were unsympathetic (particularly to how vulnerable they felt):

“I have also been really supported by the Senior managers, always responding to any concerns I had, and I can't thank them enough for allowing me to work from home some of the days and to work safely when I am in the Centre. That has put my mind at rest, and I owe them a huge debt of gratitude.”

Male, SCH

“I have not had any reassurance from senior management. Questions I asked did not seem important and any concerns were not taken as seriously as they should have been.”

Female, STC

“I have raised queries with senior managers about protocols and PPE. When the question has been too difficult, I simply received no reply.”

Male, YOI

“I wore a face mask for the first couple of months. Initially I was picked up on it by my head manager and had to explain why I thought it was wise that all staff wore masks. She disagreed.”

Female, SCH

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## Feeling protected from COVID-19

About three-quarters of staff (73%) felt as protected as possible from COVID-19 in their job. Focusing on staff who continued to work in their usual place of work (n994), a slightly smaller proportion but still more than two-thirds felt as protected as possible (68%).

Understandably, staff who continued to work in their usual workplace were over ten times more likely to feel as protected as possible if they were satisfied with **hygiene/distancing measures** in place. Feeling protected was also strongly predicted by feeling confident in **management support** and by being satisfied with **management communication**. Other predictors of feeling protected from COVID-19 were having **line management responsibility** and achieving a positive **work-life balance**.

There was a strong theme in comments from staff that they felt safer and **more protected in work** than they did in the wider community. Sites were considered a controlled environment, with people less likely to breach the rules, hygiene measures in place, and with managers communicating changes, and taking swift action if necessary:

“Everyone is worried. but feel I’m safer working in [YOI] than being out in the community where people are breaching the rules. We are well protected and supported by our managers and seniors.”

Female, YOI

“I have felt reasonably well protected from COVID plus my team has been on a rota to allow us to social distance and I feel that there has been plenty of hand sanitiser etc. available.”

Female, YOI

“We was briefed each day and as each day passes, I felt safe.”

Male, STC

There were three main themes for staff explaining specific policies or practices that left them feeling less protected in secure sites. The first is that they felt there was unnecessary footfall/staff overcrowding, with some relating this to overtime arrangements:

“My role could have been completed from home which would have freed up a desk for others and allowed more safety with less people in the workplace. (...) There were more staff in the establishment than there was before COVID-19 restrictions due to overtime being completed.”

Female, YOI

“At a time when contact should have been reduced, we're over-resourced with staff, despite the prison running on a minimal regime. We have never been that well-staffed in years! This was not for an operational requirement, it was for greed, mainly from management. In our office we initially wanted to set up a rota system so that there was limited staff in each day. This was thrown out due to people being more interested in earning overtime than keeping distance. Therefore I was forced to enter an office with more staff in it than it had pre-covid. This was the case for the whole prison.”

Female, YOI

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“Some departments have spent months with literally nothing to do and have been told that they must come to work despite having no jobs to do. I believe that this is unnecessarily exposing staff to potentially contracting COVID-19.”

Female, YOI

Second, there was a subsidiary theme that staff teams could have been organised more safely inside, with less mixing, and with longer isolation after COVID-19 symptoms or potential exposure. They cited:

“Management seem to be in on crossover bubbles at present which means they are seeing all staff at some point. (...) Surely this can lead to cross contamination.”

Female, YOI

“Staff interaction, mixing on different units daily. Staff attending mobilities to hospitals, then returning directly to Units, when the young people taken are / were locked down for 14 days.”

Female, STC

“Staff with suspected COVID returning to work after only 48 Hours rather than the expected 7 to 14 days.”

Male, YOI

Third, as with quantitative findings above, staff explained how lack of communication from management could leave them feeling less protected and more vulnerable:

“There hasn’t been much support in terms of communication from managers to do with protocol [in particular circumstances]. This is stressful as we as a team are still going on the wings and also going home to family so not knowing what we are meant to do is very stressful. Also not being informed when a member of the office goes off with symptoms can be worrying.”

Female, YOI

## Hygiene and distancing measures

While about two-thirds (69%) of staff who continued to work in their usual place of work (n994) were satisfied with the implementation of hygiene/distancing measures at work, this meant that a sizeable minority were concerned.

The strongest predictor for being satisfied with hygiene/distancing measures was feeling **management support**. Staff were more than five times more likely to be satisfied if they considered that their concerns would be taken seriously. Other predictors of satisfaction were **feeling informed** by management, good **relations with colleagues**, and considering that **children’s best interests were a primary consideration**. However, they were less likely to be satisfied with hygiene measures if they had previously needed to **self-isolate**.

Reflecting the mixed quantitative findings on satisfaction with hygiene measures, there were a number of themes from staff in explaining their concerns. The first, and strongest, theme in discussions with staff was that not all **colleagues** were following public health rules appropriately, whether “a few”, or more endemic and tolerated:

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“Whilst I am happy with the social distancing criterion which has been set for all areas, I have not always been happy with the lack of adherence by some of the staff population.”  
Male, YOI

“The few who think they can carry on as they always have and think they are immune to the facts.”  
Female, SCH

“Staff however have flouted the rules and I feel have been negligent. Taking trips out at lunch with up to 5 people in one car, holding parties and sleepovers out of work. It is immature and disrespectful behaviour that could bring serious issues through the prison gates. I think this behaviour should have been challenged more.”  
Female, YOI

“Social distancing is great at the gate. However, it falls below standard in the establishment, with more staff in offices on the units that should be in them, and also staff hugging each other as a greeting.”  
Male, YOI

“I was surprised to see that most people made no attempt to social distance. Within some meetings some people attempt to sit further, away (although not 2m). Shockingly many governors make no attempts to social distance. (...) It makes it uncomfortable for me to have to keep being 'that person' who makes a big deal out of following the rules and reminding people. It makes me feel like the odd one and also causes a lot of anxiety.”  
Female, YOI

As noted in the above quotation, there was a subsidiary concern that **managers** were not always leading by example with distancing, influencing a more relaxed public health culture. Organising overcrowded meetings was noted by staff across different sites:

“Social distancing has not been implemented well within [STC] which has led to an indifferent approach from most staff towards social distancing. Particularly as it has not been led by the top down, and staff on site are still being invited to sit in meeting rooms which are often overcrowded. I believe this has led to staff not bothering or taking measures seriously, myself included to some extent, as there is no push/emphasis on this on site.”  
Female, STC

A second strong theme in concerns was that the **environment or role** in which staff worked simply did not allow for them to adopt the public health guidance needed to keep them safe. Staff referred to confining design of buildings and needing to be hands-on with children at risk of harm:

“[STC] is a very old building and, so the corridors, for example, are narrow. The admin offices don't really allow social distances.”  
Female, STC

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“Operational staff have not been able to conform to government guidelines, and although this is understandable due to their working environment, no meaningful protective measures have been put in place to mitigate this. Staff who are based in offices have also been placed in unnecessary risk due to the cramped working conditions and general lack of space.”

Male, YOI

“Working with young people, they are also regularly inadvertently unable to follow social distancing, for example when walking upstairs as guidelines do not make allowances for example, different speeds young people walk, clustering next to doors waiting for locks, need for hands on when young people in crisis.”

Male, SCH

The third strong theme was around frontline staff experiencing delays in the deployment of **hygiene and Personal Protective Equipment [PPE]**:

“There was NO PPE or hand sanitiser at all!”

Female, YOI

“We did run out of gloves and were unable to get more. They also installed hand sanitiser dispensers outside all units but did not fill them until recently.”

Male, YOI

“The centre was very slow in getting sanitiser and some of it was watered down when it was running low. Very poor, lazy response to this deadly virus from management!! Masks & gloves only given to ALL staff from control room on site on 29/7/2020 and told we all had to wear them. This should have been given in April when England went into lockdown! I guess it is better late then never.”

Female, STC

“We had little to no PPE but were still expected to work with young people that had symptoms.”

Female, SCH

The fourth (more subsidiary) theme was around levels of **cleaning** in sites. While some staff commended cleaning regimes, there was a theme of concern particularly with specific shared areas and equipment, such as keys:

“From very early into the pandemic there were robust cleaning schedules implemented and cleaning roles allocated to prison staff.”

Female, YOI

“Working weekends / Bank Holidays, with no cleaners to clean working surfaces, door handles etc.”

Female, SCH

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“Officers have been cleaning landings and office areas, but I feel the tracker area is not cleaned enough. You have to rely on others goodwill to clean keys and radios.”

Male, YOI

“Using the same keys and touching the same gates as potentially 100s of people carries obvious risks.”

Female, YOI

The fifth (subsidiary) theme of concern was around **testing for symptoms** in sites, specifically taking temperatures for staff and visitors. Staff expressed concerns that testing was not done thoroughly enough or for long enough during the pandemic:

“Testing of all staff should have happened much earlier as, apart from new arrivals, the main risk of a breakout in [YOI] came from the staff.”

Female, YOI

“Thermometer testing was started at the Gate, used half-heartedly and then stopped.”

Female, YOI

## Knowing the public health rules to follow

Almost all staff continuing to work in their usual place of work (n994) knew the rules to follow to keep everyone protected from COVID-19 (95%).

The predictors for staff considering that they knew the rules to follow all related to interactions with management. Staff were seven times more likely to know the rules if they received good management communication. These staff were also more likely to know the rules if they had line management responsibility or received appropriate management support.

Reflecting quantitative findings, there was a strong theme from staff around being clear in their comments that they knew the rules to follow, stressing how these had been effectively communicated to them by managers.

“The instructions towards staff have been clear, however many of the staff have not followed advice and have been breaking social distancing rules on a regular basis.”

Male, YOI

“Managers have worked hard to ensure that information from both internal and external sources is communicated to the staff team. Managers have been quick to respond to government guidance despite how often and quickly this changes.”

Male, SCH

Staff who were not happy about knowing the rules referred to the frequency of rules, how they may be different from in the community, and perceived delay in communicating changes. However, there were suggestions that this improved over time:

“There has been inconsistent rules and too many changes that are not communicated to staff - often against the rules that existed for the general public.”

Male, YOI



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“Management were unfortunately very, very, late in imposing safety rules, eventually putting a notice up in the staff kitchen 3 months after lockdown!”

Female, SCH

“Initially there was miscommunication and poor decision making and uncertainty about how the situation was managed. Also lack of clarity about procedures etc. But the daily meetings improved this and lead to better decisions and procedures.”

Female, SCH

## Actively engaged in resisting the pandemic

The large majority of staff (86%) considered that everyone had been “fighting the pandemic together”, *both staff and children*. The proportion was the same (86%) for those continuing to work from their usual workplace (n994).

For those continuing in their usual workplace, predictors of recognising this cultural unity against the pandemic were: feeling that they personally **had a part to play** against COVID-19, had **management communication**, **good colleague relations**, and feeling **children’s best interests** had been a primary concern. However, they were less likely to perceive such cultural unity if they felt that the level of **restrictions had been too little**.

The large majority of all staff considered that they had *a part to play in fighting to protect their workplace from COVID-19* (86%). For those staff continuing to work in their usual place of work (n994), a similar proportion reported feeling engaged in this way against COVID-19 (89%).

Staff continuing to work in their usual workplace were more than seven and a half times more likely to feel they had a part to play in battling the pandemic if they **felt safe** at work. Other predictors for feeling engaged in fighting the pandemic were positive **management communication** and **management support**.

Staff working across all types of children’s secure sites commented on cultural unity in trying to follow public health measures:

“[I’m most impressed by] the fact everyone at [STC] has come together and insured that we have remained COVID free.”

Male, STC

“We have pulled together, providing great care and activities for the YP”

Male, SCH

In particular, staff noted the part played by children, stressing how they embraced their role in the communal effort. This included both adhering to the public health rules and accepting restrictions affecting them:

“Young people at [SCH] have been very understanding and insightful into changes that have had to be put in place due to covid. They have took on board measures and have been protective towards staff health.”

Female, SCH



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“Working with the young people collectively to ensure the safety of all from COVID-19. The young people have really understood why the measure have been implemented and have embraced it.”

Male, STC

“I think that the feeling of ‘we are all in it together’ has meant far less lads have protested and lack of regime. For example, self-harm has massively fallen.”

Male, YOI

## Reverse Cohorting Unit

A small number of staff in sites reported working on the Reverse Cohorting Unit (RCU) (25%, n244), in which children who had been open to infection (or showing symptoms) stayed for a period of time. About half of the staff on RCUs have been worried about catching the virus as a result (48%) and about two in five found it stressful (39%). Three-quarters of staff felt supported working on the RCU (77%).

Comments from staff generally reflected how most felt protected and supported on RCUs:

“I have been on the RCU throughout the whole time and I have found it to have been run very well and have felt supported always.”

Male, YOI

Almost all staff considered that the children on the RCU were well cared for (95%). Again, this was generally reflected in staff comments:

“I believe that the YPs who have had to isolate have been well cared for getting individual exercise, showers, given play stations in the cells as well as the opportunity to complete their restricted regime wherever possible.”

Male, YOI

“Despite guidance of young people having to go into self-isolation for 14 days staff have endeavoured to use this opportunity to build relationships with young people.”

Female, SCH

However, there was a theme of concern from staff both in sites and in headquarters with the **health** of children isolating in RCUs. This included both mental health, and their physical health if they were not getting enough fresh air:

“Concerned for young people coming in to [SCH] with mental health issues and needing to be isolated for 14 days.”

Female, SCH

“When the young people were first in isolation they didn't go out for fresh air. This was reviewed and now if any young person is isolated they go out for fresh air twice daily.”

Female, SCH

Staff expressed a similar theme that isolating in the RCU would affect their development. They were concerned that it affected assessment, education, and other interventions:

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“Delay in assessments for mental health needs due to reverse cohorting.”

Female, YOI

“When they come back from hospital or court, they have to be on like a reverse cohort unit isolating for two weeks and I'm sure one of the boys (...) has had a negative COVID test and he still has to stay on the reverse cohort because of just the guidelines. (...) Taking into account that every time a child has to go to court, [they] have to reverse cohort for 14 days, that must have a really negative impact for them; they can't join like the normal regime, education and stuff.”

Male, YCS HQ

“Difficult to engage with new admissions due to 14-day isolation. This sets back building any therapeutic alliance.”

Female, SCH

## Parents' and carers' reflections

### Children's safety from COVID-19

There was a strong theme from parents of children in all types of custodial institution that children were safe, or safer than in the community, from the virus while in custody. There was felt to be less risk of transmission in a controlled environment and more chance of the child abiding by government restrictions:

“I am less worried [about the child because in custody]. He possibly wouldn't have bothered keeping himself safe while if he was out there [due to ADHD and autism].”

Mother, YOI

“My honest reaction was glad in a sense [that he was in custody] because I know he'd be safer there. One with the COVID and two he'd not get into any bother out here.”

Grandmother, YOI

Nevertheless, parents were still understandably concerned about their children's safety from COVID while in custody:

“Obviously, [worrying] is to be expected really. How they're going to manage it in there, and just the normal parent worry of him being in there and dealing with it, and how the prison are going to be dealing with it.”

Father, YOI

### Public health restrictions

Parents of children in custody were fairly resigned to the necessity of public health restrictions affecting their child, including contact with them – “*it is what it is*”. Restrictions affecting both children and parents were generally accepted as painful but inevitable and unavoidable:

“To be honest with you, [COVID-19] is what it is, and he's just had to deal with it (...) It might mean that everyone has to have an isolation period to keep [infection] under control but if they have to do that. I would say they have to do that.”

Mother, STC

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“It’s just something we’ve had to get on with, and deal with.”  
Father, YOI

Overall, parents were generally supportive of public health measures taken in sites. There was a strong theme of the child’s health and safety being the top priority, and so restrictions on either parents (in terms of contact with the child) or their child were seen as justified sacrifices:

“But I understand the reasons why. It’s not like they’re just saying that. There’s logic behind why they have to do this. I’d rather it be like that and be hard for a couple of months and know that my daughter is not at risk.”  
Mother, STC

“He’s staying in or quarantining or whatever, so if it means we have to speak to him on Skype rather than actually physically see him to try and lessen this virus, then I think that’s a sacrifice people should make.”  
Mother, STC

There was a sense from parents and carers that children in custody following public health guidelines was simply them playing their part in the societal response to the pandemic. Their efforts were expected as part of the united effort from the population as a whole:

“The rules have changed. They have to stick to the rules, that’s the only thing. Everyone has to isolate, it’s not you know, it has to be done. Everyone has to stay away from everyone. Small groups. It’s worldwide now, everyone has to do the same thing.”  
Father, YOI

However, parents were concerned about particular restrictions and how they would be experienced by their children. In particular, there were concerns both about how the length of isolation and the absence of developmental work:

“A long part of this time, [child] has been in isolation. I think it’s such a shame because all the work what could have been done with him, you know, to prepare for when he does come out. It’s not actually getting done, is it?”  
Mother, STC

Reflecting children’s comments, parents also described how not being able to hug their children during visits would be difficult, and therefore some preferred to avoid visits altogether:

“He also cannot adhere to the boundaries set. Where you would say, “You can’t just come over and hug me”, you couldn’t stop him. He’d be there. (...) And if I was to then say, “You can’t do that”, you’d have a blow up.”  
Mother, STC

## Protection for children

Overall, there was a strong sense from parents and carers that they felt their children were protected from transmission risks in custody, and that sites were implementing public health strategies and control measures well:

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"I think a large part of [not being worried] was due to the fact that we weren't even allowed in. I could see that the prison were taking particular steps to minimize the effect that COVID could have."

Social Worker, STC

However, there were a number of specific public health concerns (for them and their children) that parents discussed. These included the availability of PPE and risks from staff not isolating. As the last quotation below shows, this could lead to parents questioning whether their child would be safer at home with them:

"I mean, the one thing I did notice...actually was their PPE. Their PPE equipment at that took a little bit long because I was talking to his caseworker like, why haven't you got that equipment there yet? But is that the places fault or is that the government's fault?"

Mother, SCH

"[Child] was mentioning about the officers coming from the outside and bringing COVID there and obviously, for them being locked inside, [child] was thinking that if anyone will bring it from the outside, it will spread very quickly inside. And that will be a big problem."

Mother, YOI

"I mean there's two ways, if I can put myself in their shoes I don't know if I'd be safer. You know, the officers are still in and out of there every day, going home to their families and coming back. Who knows? I don't know. I wouldn't know. If he was at home, he'd be banged up upstairs in his room."

Father, YOI

## Communication with about public health

There were mixed feelings from parents and carers about how much they were being kept informed about public health in relation to their children during the pandemic. Some parents recalled being told about the restrictions, and even described being updated about potential cases in the site:

"I was informed of you know things were going on type of thing, what were put in place."

Mother, STC

"I would say they would call me probably twice a week and so forth... And let me know how he is. Let me know what's going on regarding the COVID. So, yeah, I was well informed and that helped to bring my anxiety down."

Mother of a male over 16-years, SCH

More positive experiences typically relied upon having one or more staff contacts who was responsive to their concerns:

"If I've got any worries or concerns, I would call [staff member] from [YOI]. She's a family liaison officer or something like that. She's pretty good."

Father, YOI

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Parents described how this positive communication helped alleviate their anxieties, including about not being able to fulfil their parenting role at this time:

“Yeah, I was well informed. They told me, in regard to PPE equipment being used etc. etc. They kept me updated, which helps a lot with anxiety because, as I said, I was not able to be there as a parent.”

Mother, STC

For other parents, they felt that they did not receive sufficient communication from the site about how their child was doing at this time, and what they could do to help as parents. Where there were less positive experiences of communication, parents and carers relied upon their children for updates.

“I haven't heard anything off [YOI] to be honest...No. I think I've had one letter. I think I had one letter through the post.”

Mother, YOI

“I wish there will be something they will send at the beginning, kind of like a clear explanation of what is happening and why. And, you know, “What are we doing to help boys to be safe and healthy”. That would be very helpful at the very beginning. You know, just very clear explanation what's going on. Guidance for parents, what they can do in the meantime, you know, and this and that, so just a very clear communication.”

Mother, YOI

“I don't remember any particular correspondence about COVID itself.”

Social Worker, STC

“Well a lot of the information I got was from [child] himself. He was the main communicator with what was going on with me myself.”

Mother, STC

## Senior leaders' reflections

### Protecting children and staff

At the start of the pandemic, senior leaders were faced with an uncertain but potentially catastrophic public health crisis in custody. Working with advice from other statutory bodies, they were forced to plan for the worst-case scenarios in order to protect children and staff in their care:

“By mid-February, we were beginning to think reasonable worst-case scenarios for the service are horrendous and we were talking about thousands of deaths, we were talking about thousands of staff off duty. We were talking about body bags, we were talking about setting up temporary mortuaries in prison and kind of Tesco's freezer vans coming in that were covered up that would be taking the bodies away. I mean, just really awful, awful stuff that was so extreme that it was almost difficult to comprehend. I remember thinking that this stuff feels like too much to think about how we cope logistically, let alone how we

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cope as an organisation and make them keep this thing moving, and how we cope as human beings having to do this. So it just felt, almost felt completely overwhelming.”  
Senior Leader, YCS HQ

In the event, senior staff at YCS headquarters and across sites widely considered that children **had been successfully protected** from COVID-19 in custody during the first half-year of the pandemic. They noted how infection rates among children had remained very low during the initial lockdown period and the summer-autumn that followed. In addition, with the exception of one STC, senior leaders felt that children generally felt protected:

“If you look at the prevalence of transmission etc, I suppose we must have had something really right, though. [In the past two months], we’ve had one positive case amongst the children, so whatever we’re doing there was quite good and quite right.”  
Senior Leader, YOI

Senior staff at YCS headquarters did not feel at risk themselves when travelling to government buildings, and felt that colleagues were being very respectful of physical distancing. Senior leaders in sites discussed how they themselves felt relatively safe, although they had some common concern about the possibility of taking COVID-19 home from work to their families.

However, there was a strong theme of concern across senior leaders that **some staff in establishments were very worried about catching COVID-19**, particularly early on in the pandemic and after the first staff cases. There was a subsidiary theme from YOI senior leaders that public health worry among their staff were in part driven by union and family concerns.

“I think a lot of pressure from families about putting themselves at risk by coming to work.”  
Senior Leader, YOI

“In terms of COVID, [staff] verbalised very much that they were really concerned about it. And a lot of it was driven by unions, a lot of it driven by family.”  
Senior Leader, YOI

## Hygiene and distancing measures

There was a strong theme from senior leaders both in YCS headquarters and in sites that public health **policies and procedures were sound**. Headquarters leaders felt that early liaison with Public Health bodies and the NHS had been sound, site planning had happened quickly, external partners had stayed away from sites in order to limit footfall, and public health procedures in sites had been implemented swiftly. The only exception was frustration from site senior leaders that there was insufficient PPE (across all types of sites) at the start of the pandemic.

“It was definitely initially a very massive shortage of PPE. (...) I think we did manage to get enough PPE that we managed to borrow, really. I was sending somebody every day to see our local health team. Although we never ran out of it; we managed to buy some online from eBay.”  
Senior Leader, SCH

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However, there was strong theme of concern across leaders that the biggest danger to public health came from staff not implementing procedures, either through deliberate non-compliance or through complacency. The irony was noted that the safer staff felt at work, the less likely they were to consistently comply with public health procedures. Senior leaders were concerned that site staff working in teams were acting as though they were in one big 'bubble' (family unit without restrictions), and that site managers found it difficult or uncomfortable to enforce the rules:

"And I think now our biggest danger would be complacency because staff do feel really safe in the centre."

Senior Leader, SCH

"The [YOI] Governor looked at the CCTV of staff. [They] said very few of them were obeying social distancing. So I think, I think hygiene measures, all of our policies and procedures are spot on, (...) it's practice and adherence to them that's the challenge and that's what staff are struggling with. That's kind of behaviour stuff isn't it, that's around local leadership, that's about refreshing comms, there's all sorts of things going on there to kind of keep people on their toes and reminding themselves of this."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

"[Enforcing distancing and hygiene] has been hard because it's like I feel like a complete nag. I walk around the home, I say, "You're not two metres. You're not two metres" (...) You're pulling staff up on yet another thing where they're already doing a challenging job."

Senior Leader, SCH

There was also recognition from YCS senior leaders in headquarters and in sites that the **architecture and environment** of institutions made physical distancing implementation difficult:

"I think it's more about our physical environment, makes it kind of really difficult to be fully compliant with everything."

Senior Leader, YOI

## Communication with about public health

There was a general sense from site leaders that there was enough communication to ensure that **everyone should know what to do**:

"So I think the comms work, there shouldn't be anybody that says they don't know what to do or don't know what, what the rules are. I think they all do."

Senior Leader, STC

The exception voiced was a noted lack of clarity around any particular action required in relation to those who were particularly vulnerable, including those from **ethnic minority backgrounds**:

"Nobody's told me how I need to treat my staff differently when Black or Asian or minority ethnic. Does it mean that they shouldn't be going out on hospital visits and all the rest of it, you know, are they actually at greater risk? And I don't think that we got any answers



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around that. It wasn't that they were mistreated or singled out it was the fact that there was almost like a colour-blind approach."

Senior Leader, STC

There was a theme from SCH managers that there was **too much communication** from the YCS. They described an overwhelming number of emails to be able to assimilate the information. In addition, the managers noted that this was made harder because the communication used terminology and context that was **not appropriate** to SCHs and needing to be interpreted to make it useable:

"You would just get a shitload of stuff that you had to try and make sense of."

Senior Leader, SCH

## Reverse cohorting

Senior leaders were torn in their reflections on RCUs for children (re)entering sites or with risk of exposure. On the positive side, there was a clear sense that RCUs had **played a key role** in managing the public health risk and keep infections low. However, on the negative side, there was a sense that isolation was not conducive to either **children's wellbeing** or creating a Child First inclusive culture. Consequently, YCS headquarters staff reflected that they would like to increase the restricted daily schedule and reduce the time spent in RCUs.

There appeared to have been more flexibility adopted in SCHs than other types of sites in relation to RCUs. Senior Leaders from these sites reported working with Public Health England to adopt variations to the 14-day isolation policy, reducing to 6 days providing that they tested negative for COVID twice in order to safeguard mental wellbeing:

"We've had a conversation the week before last with Public Health England and community health, because we were saying, that there are some number of kids who've got mental health issues, suicidal ideas, or low mood depression. [For them], the 14 days locked in a room, in a building that you don't even know where you are (because most kids don't even know where), is not good. So, we've come to an agreement that based on risk, if we test them on day one and day six, and come back negative, then they can actually mix that within their unit."

Senior Leader, SCH

In addition, sites did start to adapt the regime for children on isolation over time. For instance, one SCH responded to children's requests to allow them more time outside in the fresh air:

"So, the young people's feedback was that the only thing was, we didn't do a fresh air break. We didn't do it because I didn't feel confident. So I made a decision - if we have to go into isolation, we'll put a process in place that children will be offered at least two, if not three or four fresh air breaks a day."

Senior Leader, SCH



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## External stakeholders' reflections

### Protection for children

The dominant theme among external stakeholders was that the youth secure estate, both the sites and the YCS in its role, had succeeded **in public health** during lockdown and the first 6-9 months of the pandemic. Those responsible had protected children in their care from harm, and protected institutions from widespread infection during a time when the risk to children was understood to be high and there was no vaccine available. Stakeholders were clear that this was a creditable achievement:

"In the YCS Estate, even though we've had outbreaks, most of those outbreaks have been with staff. We've had a few with prisoners self-isolating or shielding because of health, health conditions. But it hasn't spread rapidly in the Youth Custody Estate and that is because of the protocols we've got in place. We're adhering to all the guidelines, and we've got hand sanitizers for cleaning stuff on a regular basis."

Representative organisation

"I think we have to give them credit. They did control the virus. They did not have widespread outbreaks across their estate, and they're still not doing so. So I think that deserves some plaudits."

Governance body

"I would say that it feel on the whole that it's been managed really, really well in terms of making sure the children were safe. That's the priority for them, and that in the main has worked."

Representative organisation

"I think in terms of keeping them safe from COVID, the YCS we've done really well on that. The infection rates have been pretty low. I know that there have been outbreaks in sites and stuff, but I think on the whole, I would say that I think they move very quickly, very early on to try and safeguard. And, you know, I know that they were doing work around kind of shielding the really vulnerable kids and stuff like that. So I think that they've done a really good job in that, on that aspect of safety."

Governance body

"I think it's to the enormous credit of everybody. In the HMPPS and YCS included in this. The extent to which in the first wave, the virus was contained. So it was kept out of prisons. I mean, I just think that's to everybody's credit. And we were really strong supporters of that approach, early days. So lock it down, control it and [consider] everything going forward and that I think worked well."

Governance body

### Reverse Cohorting

There was clear unease among stakeholders about RCUs and their **effect on children's mental wellbeing**:

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“Every child coming in on the back of public health guidance had to isolate for fourteen days in the early days of COVID. It's changed a bit now, but in the early days, guidance was very strict. Management and staff did not like it one bit because it's tough to isolate a child away from others for fourteen days. You're going to be on your own and you're going to be with an adult who's going to be dressed in [masks] for those fourteen days. I have no doubt [that] has being very tough for children. We have heard of one case of a child where a child really struggled after three or four days, really struggled to the point where they mentally broke down. (...) They had to get mental health [staff] to look at assessing to that child [under] the Mental Health Act.”

Governance body

“I think initially they were too restrictive, and they hadn't thought through how to deliver that sort of separate time or separate regime for those children in a sensible humane way. So, not by locking them in a cell, but by trying to deliver something for the children you're cohorting.”

Governance body

Stakeholders noted the situation in one STC of children in the RCU being given almost no time out of their rooms. This was current at the time of interview, but which eventually led to children being withdrawn from the STC. The stakeholder also pointed to inadequacies in governance monitoring, for which procedures were consequently reviewed:

“An example came out the other day, this was an STC. The kids in the reverse cohort unit were being locked up for twenty-three-and-a-half hours a day and had been right from the outset. (...) So there's monitoring on site, I find it staggering that the monitor hadn't seen that.”

Governance body

## Summary

Although some **children** were worried about catching COVID-19, most felt well protected and supported by public health measures in custody. Feeling protected relied on children knowing what rules to follow and confidence in staff addressing their concerns. Most children felt that they themselves had a part to play in public health protection, predicted by a cultural unity that they and staff were in it together. However, both this cultural unity and their feelings of safety could be undermined by resentment of staff behaviour not following the same public health rules.

A substantial minority of children in custody spent time on a RCU during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most found the social isolation a stressful experience, but felt supported through it. Particularly important to feeling supported was knowing that staff took seriously their public health concerns and attended to their basic needs (including physical exercise). Some children preferred being on the RCU, as it could mean a break from the wider site relations or culture.

A substantial minority of **staff** continuing to work in sites during the early months of the pandemic were concerned about the ‘real risk’ of infection at work, more likely if in a vulnerable

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group. This was largely related to anxieties about the wider pandemic rather than the workplace, although confidence in management support was important. However, most staff felt as protected as possible in the workplace, depending largely on whether they felt appropriate public health measures were in place, and again had confidence in management support/communication. Most staff were satisfied with hygiene and distancing measures, but there were concerns including colleagues flouting rules and the work not conducive to following the rules. Almost all were clear that they knew the public health rules, again with the strong theme that this relied on management support and communication. The large majority of staff felt a sense of cultural unity in dealing with the pandemic, stressing also the part that children had played.

A quarter of staff in sites had worked in RCUs for children isolating. Many found this worrying and stressful, although most felt supported and that the children were also well cared for. However, staff had concerns that isolating in the RCU would affect children's health and development.

**Parents and carers**, while still concerned about public health, felt that children were safe and relatively protected from the pandemic while in custody, although they had a number of concerns about specific risks. They were generally supportive (at best, or accepting at worst) of the public health restrictions their children were under, seeing their protection from the pandemic as the priority, but there were concerns about the length of time in isolation and about lack of development work. There were mixed feelings about whether they felt informed by sites, typically depending on whether they had a responsive key staff contact.

**Senior leaders** were forced to plan for an uncertain but potentially catastrophic public health crisis in custody. In the event, senior leaders widely considered that children had been successfully protected from COVID-19 during the six to nine months of the pandemic. They considered that public health policies and procedures in headquarters and sites were sound, but they were concerned about staff not implementing procedures and the physical environment in some sites making physical distancing difficult. There was a general sense that there was enough communication about public health (with the possible exception of action required for those particularly vulnerable), although SCH leaders complained that it was often written inappropriately for their sites. There was a clear sense that the RCUs had played a key role in managing public health risk, but concern about the extent of regime restrictions in there and the effect on children's wellbeing.

**External stakeholders** praised the YCS and sites for succeeding in applying effective public health measures during the first six to nine months of the pandemic, when the initial risk to children was potentially high. However, like senior leaders, there was clear unease about the operation of RCUs and their effect on children's mental wellbeing.

## 3. Mental Wellbeing

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This chapter explores the experiences of mental wellbeing for children and staff across during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, including those working off-site. It considers coping with lockdown, how it was challenging, and wellbeing support. It also considers staff

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work-life balance, and support for COVID-19 related personal distress (e.g. family bereavement)

## Children's experiences

### Coping with lockdown

Of children across the secure estate (N391), the large majority (94%) felt that they had been coping well during the initial lockdown. Children were more likely to cope well if they had access to **purposeful activities**. For instance, having “enough to do” in their rooms meant children were over three times more likely to feel they coped well. Having **supportive staff** was also a predictor of coping well, with children feeling there were people in custody who cared about them being almost three times more likely to have coped well. The two factors significant in making coping harder were when the children **found visitor restrictions tough**, and if they were serving **recall** sentences.

Four in five children (81%) felt that the initial lockdown experience had been ‘fine’. The three significant predictors of children finding lockdown ‘fine’ were all related to support from others, both inside and outside the site. Again, if a **child found visitor restrictions tough**, they were significantly less likely to have found lockdown ‘fine’. Conversely, the strongest predictor of finding lockdown fine was **contact with family**. Children “able to keep in contact with family enough” were almost seven times more likely to find lockdown ‘fine’. Similarly, **access to support** inside was significant, with children who found it “easy to talk to someone about how they feel” three times more likely to find the lockdown experience ‘fine’.

Indeed, most children (55%) felt that there had been some positives to the COVID-19 situation in custody with, for instance, more than a third (36%) telling us that dealing with it had made custody more interesting. One in six children (18%) who had been in custody before the pandemic (n252) felt that it had actually improved the experience of life inside.

Children tried to cope with the lockdown situation by **occupying their time with activities**, both in their rooms and outside, plus the importance of physical activities for relieving stress:

“Wasn’t stressful because I had lots to do in my cell.”  
16-year-old, YOI

“Alright, because obviously I’ve got a big family, so obviously they just sent me like bare games in and that and bare movies and that.”  
16-year-old, STC

“When I’m alone I have mad thoughts about doing something stupid but when I do my cell workouts it helps open my mind to more positive thoughts.”  
17-year-old, YOI

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Indeed, children **surprised themselves** by how they were able to cope, adapt or accept the difficult circumstances.

“I’m more resilient than I thought I’d be. Thought I wouldn’t be able to hack it as much, but I’ve just been chilling.”

17-year-old, YOI

“I’ve coped alright. I just get on with it. Nothing you can really do init. Just adjusted with the changes.”

17-year-old, YOI

The **importance of contact** and being able to speak to others (inside and outside) about how they feel, which came out strongly in the quantitative analysis, featured when children discussed coping with lockdown. Speaking to others was able to act as a distraction or help give perspective.

“I got people that I can talk to on the phone, so I just call someone or when they call me. And like I just have a general conversation can be about anything as long as my mind is off of what, what’s going on in my mind.”

17-year-old, STC

“Long innit but it is what it is, I can’t lie like, it does feel bad about that, but I’ve got to look at it this way, my mum said look at it this way, I’ve got my life innit, I’m still alive innit so my mum said I’ve just got to give thanks and praise to the Lord, innit, there’s other people out there dying.”

17-year-old, YOI

Children noted how being able to **contact their family** more often, with extra phone credit and video calls, had helped them (and their families) to cope at this time:

“Having extra credit helps a lot, me and my family. It helps us mentally- keeps us talking to or family more often.”

18-year-old, YOI

“I’ve coped quite well to be fair. I thought it would have been a little bit harder, but yeah, it’s been alright (...) Because, I think it’s because they’ve actually introduced like the purple visits and the visits because and obviously more consist, more consistent contact with my family over the phone because obviously I was getting like visits maybe twice a week and things like that and I wasn’t really ringing them in the days and that and now I’m ringing them every day, like part of everyday life.”

17-year-old, YOI

In relation to children finding the pandemic ‘fine’, or even preferring it, there was a theme around being organised into smaller **‘family groups’** during the pandemic, making it easier for them to deal with the institutional culture:

“It’s been better for me, the regime and being in the smaller groups. It’s better for my anxiety. (...) I have a lot going on so spending more time in my pad has been better, less

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stressful. I don't like being in groups of people anyway. The smaller groups are better, but I still find it hard to cope.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Finding the lockdown period difficult

However, almost half (47%) of all children across youth custody had found life inside more difficult at times – more anxious or more miserable - because of the lockdown situation. About half of children (51%) who had been in custody before the pandemic (n252) felt it had made living inside worse.

Almost a quarter (24%) “felt more anxious because of the way things have been inside during COVID”. Significant predictors for feeling more anxious were **feeling unsafe from harm** (not COVID-19 related), **having additional health or learning needs, worried about family, status other than Section 90/91**, and finding the culture **not quiet enough to relax and sleep** at night. Children who had been feeling unsafe from harm from others were more than four times as likely to feel more anxious during lockdown, and those with additional needs were more than three times as likely to feel anxious.

Two in five children (42%) had “felt more miserable” because of the way things have been inside during COVID. The two significant predictors of children feeling miserable were finding it **tough having fewer or no visitors** and the culture **not quiet enough to relax and sleep at night**. Children who found it quiet enough to sleep were half as likely to have felt miserable.

Almost a third of children (31%) had often felt alone during this period. Significant predictors for often feeling alone during the pandemic were having **additional health or learning needs**, finding the culture **not quiet enough to relax and sleep at night, not enough family contact**, and **lacking staff support relationships**. Children were more than twice as likely to feel alone if they had additional needs, but 58% less likely if they were able to speak to someone about how they feel and 74% less likely if they had enough family contact.

Some children discussing their experiences of lockdown in interviews described how they found this time difficult. In particular, they talked about how stressful it was if confined to their **rooms during the day** with **limited interactions and activities**:

“Because they weren’t letting me out and I was stressing (...) I’m living like a dog right now, they’re saying that I could go to paradise, I have never killed no one, I’ve never raped no one, I’ve never done anything like that in my life, so if I die I’m going to [inaudible] or heaven or paradise. So I said I wanna kill myself innit. I said this ain’t the life to live.”

17-year-old, YOI

“It was a bit stressful because I couldn't interact with anyone, and the days felt long.”

17-year-old, YOI

“I think I feel like I have [been more miserable] cos you're just doing the same thing every day and it's just watching TV for most hours of the day and going to sleep, can't do that for that long it makes some people go a bit crazy.”

15-year-old, YOI



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Reflecting quantitative findings, the **restrictions to family visiting and family contact** were themes when reflecting on why lockdown could be difficult.

“Won’t let me see my son, won’t let kids come into the jail. I kept in touch but not as much as liked to, phones cost a fortune, 20 minutes a day. Used to have visit every week; feels like mental torture.”

17-year-old, YOI

**Uncertainty** in the children’s lives, exacerbated by the pandemic, increased any stress and anxiety:

“Felt more anxious about being in cell for so long, worried about what happens next, my transition, worried about my family stuff.”

18-year-old, YOI

## Wellbeing support

Most children suggested that they felt support was at hand. The large majority felt that it would have been easy to see a nurse (85%) or a mental health worker (84%). Health support is explored further in the Regime and Activities chapter.

Two-thirds of children (68%) felt there were people who **care** for them in their establishment, and three-quarters (77%) felt it was easy to speak to someone about how they were feeling.

Three factors significantly predicted children finding it “easy to speak to someone about how they feel”. The strongest predictor was maintaining **family contact**, which meant children were eight times more likely to find it easy to talk about how they felt. Having a **sense of agency** was also important, for instance, children who felt they had a say in what happened when they were released were three times more likely to feel they could talk about how they felt. In addition to family contact, and related to supporting agency, **encouraging staff relationships** was also a significant factor (e.g. where positive behaviour has been affirmed).

## Staff experiences

### Staff coping

Of all staff involved in running the secure estate (N1220 responses), almost nine in ten felt they were **coping** pretty well with everything (89%), and seven in ten (70%) reported that the COVID-19 experience at work had been fine for them. Indeed, a large majority (85%) agreed that there had been some positives to the situation.

Staff were five times more likely to be coping well if they had achieved a **work-life balance**. Staff were also significantly more likely to be coping well if they received adequate **wellbeing support** and had **supportive colleagues**. However, coping was more challenging for those staff who were **worried about public health** at work.

Reflecting the quantitative analysis, staff discussed how achieving a work-life balance was critical to how well they managed to cope overall. In particular, working remotely at home at this time could bring both benefits with more flexibility and autonomy, and problems separating work

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from homelife. This is recurrent in this briefing, and explored in more detail in dedicated section below.

“[Home working was good because] You could actually manage your own circumstances. [However] I think that the mental issue on that is quite different because there are people struggling to take a separation from work and home.”

Female, YCS HQ

For onsite staff across the secure estate, the changes in working circumstances and covering for staff who were shielding/isolating were strong themes in pressures on their coping:

“There has been more pressure on the staff that are still working!”

Female, YOI

“We had to make changes within our team due to staffing as a result of staff needing to isolate, get tested etc, this has impacted on staff emotional wellbeing, and extra support supervisions have been required.”

Female, SCH

On the other hand, again reflecting quantitative analysis, staff both working remotely and across all sites noted how camaraderie and collegial support had been a feature in coping:

“If I had not had amazing colleagues, I would have gone off with stress.”

Female, YOI

“In the majority, I would say that the impact on staff wellbeing has been positive. Teamwork, comradery, and mindfulness with regards to each other have increased.”

Female, SCH

In relation to the ‘positives’ to the situation, some staff across all types of secure sites described their workplace as “less stressful and happier” (YOI), partly because of a more settled or person-centred culture:

“To me, it feels that all staff as a whole feel more settled, less on edge and absence has decreased in relation to stress and anxiety of being at work.”

Female, STC

“I feel throughout the pandemic, that life has been more relaxed, and people have been more concerned with individuals’ wellbeing.”

Male, SCH

## Feeling unhappy or stressed at work

About a third of all staff (30%) were feeling more miserable because of the way things had been at work during the pandemic. Staff were significantly more likely to be more miserable if they felt differential treatment because of their **ethnicity** had made coping more difficult. Staff were also more likely to feel miserable if they were **younger** (aged 24 or under) or were **female**. When staff considered their **sense of purpose** or the overall **staff morale** to be worse than before, they were also significantly more likely to be feeling miserable. However, staff were less likely to

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feel miserable if they achieved a **work-life balance**, felt **safe from harm**, and received adequate **wellbeing support**.

About a third of all staff (35%) had been concerned about their work-related stress levels. Staff were more likely to feel stressed if they had **public health concerns** or experienced worse morale. However, achieving a **work-life balance** and receiving adequate **wellbeing support** helped reduce feelings of stress.

For those staff continuing to work with children (n617) a similar proportion (35%), considered that their stress levels related to the job had caused them concern. Again, this was significantly more likely if staff had **public health concerns** (feeling at risk of COVID-19). Similarly, achieving a **work-life balance** and receiving adequate **wellbeing support** reduced feelings of stress. Additionally, for staff continuing to work with children, **communication with management** helped reduce stress.

Reflecting qualitative comments, discussions noted how public health concerns were a big factor in stress about work at this time. For obvious reasons, staff working on-site, and who could not work remotely, were particularly concerned:

“I suffer with anxiety, and COVID-19 has made this situation much worse. But putting a brave face throughout and trying to get through this the best I can, but it has been difficult.”

Female, YOI

This anxiety about public health was increased if they felt that colleagues or managers were not taking the problem seriously enough, again particularly if they carried a higher risk (e.g. through ethnicity):

“I felt that measures did not come into place early enough, and this could have eased a lot of anxiety and stress.”

Male, SCH

“Management and people not taking this virus seriously has affected my mental health.”

Female, YOI

“I worried a lot, maybe due to my personal circumstances being from Black ethnic group and knowing how COVID-19 disproportionately affects us. And when I could see that not everybody took the risks seriously.”

Male, SCH

“I felt very vulnerable when we had a case as it made it very real and raised my worries about taking it home to my family. My biggest concern has been that colleges have not always followed social distancing and that the possible impact of this could be huge.”

Female, YOI

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Similarly, staff who were restricted or isolating worried in advance about how safe they would be when returning to their usual workplace:

“I am worried about the following: hot desking, cleanliness of facilities, amount of people in office and whether they will social distance, travelling on packed trains and the impact of being in the office will have on my anxiety.”

Female, YCS HQ

Reflecting quantitative findings, discussions with staff about their stress again featured pressures around achieving a work-life balance, and particularly work encroaching on homelife. There was a repeated sub-theme that the situation was not helped by managers explicitly or implicitly encouraging longer working hours:

“Because [Senior Leaders] are at home, they're not switching off. They're sending me stuff in stupid hours and expecting their response which adds on to the pressure. And in certain circumstances, as much as they've said, “Well, we understand”, you know, it's difficult.”

Male, YCS HQ

In the early months of the pandemic, there were also added pressures on home-working staff from children being at home due to nursery and school closures. Staff could struggle juggling these responsibilities with work, with negative effects on wellbeing:

“My stress levels are very high, due to balancing work and home-schooling young children. Stress levels are not solely about work.”

Female, YOI

“I really struggled with home schooling and working from home, and there was no empathy from management about this. It put real stress upon me.”

Female, YOI

In addition, staff described how working remotely could be isolating and that this could lead to mental health issues:

“Although there was support throughout my working from home, there was always the feeling of isolation and not being able to fulfil your role effectively as I didn't want to impose on my staff team to assist me as they had a job to do as well. There were times when my mental health did suffer.”

Male, SCH

This quotation combines concerns about public health with the strong theme of guilt (also seen above) at shielding/isolating/restricted at home while colleagues worked on site:

“I spent a period of time working from home which I found difficult especially when the staff team were dealing with young people in isolation due to a confirmed case. I have been worried due to an underlying health condition which makes things more difficult.”

Female, SCH

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Staff also discussed the stress caused by the poor communication from management, particularly if this related to public health or future planning:

“[Stress was increased by] lack of building assessment, lack of welfare supervision, lack of communication regarding return to work.”

Male, SCH

## Work-life balance

More than two-thirds of all staff (68%) considered that they had achieved a positive work-life balance.

Staff were significantly more likely to achieve a positive work-life balance if they received adequate **management support** and **management communication**. Other statistically significant predictors of a work-life balance included there being **changes in working practice** during the COVID-19 experience such as new roles or remote working. However, a work-life balance was less likely for those with **line management responsibility**, who had experienced **personal distress** related to COVID-19, and those who were **currently studying for qualifications**.

Certainly, an improved work-life balance was a major theme in discussions with staff. Primarily, this was the case with head office staff, on-site administrative staff who could work remotely, and staff who were restricted from being onsite (e.g. teachers, psychologists). Themes included staff being able to focus more without the office distractions, reduced commuting time and stress, and being empowered to manage their own day:

“Not having to commute and get up really early and just flexible in terms of managing my own workload and more time in the evening.”

Female, YCS HQ

“More productive as I am able to take breaks that suit my day and start earlier or finish later.”

Female, YCS HQ

However, staff across operational sites also talked about gaining a better work-life balance because of pressures and expectations of staff at this time being eased somewhat:

“The pressure in relation to requirements of my department’s roles eased slightly, which supported an improved work/life balance.”

Male, STC

There were knock-on health benefits for staff of this improved work-life balance, in addition to more time for their families:

“I have not had to travel, and I have more time at home and for exercise so overall a positive impact on my work output.”

Female, YCS HQ

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“My priorities have been reassessed to focus on the importance of my family - it's not always easy to leave work on time etc. due to ongoing commitments and workload, but working from home has meant that commuting time has been eliminated and that increased my family time.”

Female, SCH

However, some staff struggled with maintaining a positive work-life balance when they were working from home. For headquarters staff then working remotely, the reasons discussed included without office structure and supervising home-schooling:

“I have also found myself pretty consistently logging on anywhere between 7.00am-8.00am and working until 6pm or afterwards, often without a break.”

Female, YCS HQ

There was a strong and recurring theme that a positive work-life balance was made harder to achieve because of an expectation (real or perceived) that managers expected remote workers to produce more, but that this was hampered because of increased (online) meetings and communications:

“I have felt at times that there is an expectation for you to work harder and longer to prove you are doing something worthwhile. I have had entire days of back-to-back meetings with no break and then still get chased for work as if I have not been doing anything else.”

Female, YCS HQ

“Massive increase in the number of meetings. Regular meetings have not been adapted so will last a number of hours. Back-to-back meetings makes it very difficult to find the time to do the actual work without having to work lots of overtime hour (...) Emails would start first thing in the morning, 7 o'clock, they would go on all evening and there was just no work life balance at all. And at the same time I had a [child], and I basically didn't even see my [child] for like 3 months and it just came to a point where I had no down time.”

Female, YCS HQ

“COVID-19 had given permission for managers to arrange meetings over lunch and beyond the normal working day.”

Female, YCS HQ

For onsite staff, a positive work-life balance was made more difficult because of working longer hours to cover isolating or shielding colleagues, which in turn could put pressure on family relationships:

“My work life balance has been in all honesty horrendous during this time. I am (...) generally working near on 50-hour weeks due to my group being 25 % down and the rest of us having to pick up the slack to ensure Oscar duties are covered. It is not appreciated [at home].”

Male, YOI



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## Wellbeing support

The large majority of staff (82%) were satisfied with the wellbeing support available to them during the pandemic. Three quarters (75%) considered that staff have been looked after during this period. More than nine in ten felt supported by colleagues (93%), and more than four in five felt supported by their manager (85%)

Staff were six times more likely to be satisfied with wellbeing support if they felt that managers would **take their public health concerns seriously**. They were also almost three times more likely to be satisfied if **management communicated well** with them. Those with **line management responsibility** and who felt **safe from physical harm** and **safe from COVID-19** were also significantly more likely to be satisfied with wellbeing support. Satisfaction with wellbeing support was also more likely for those staff achieving a **work-life balance**. However, **younger staff** were less satisfied with available wellbeing support.

Both onsite and offsite staff recognised the processes and support around public health quickly introduced by organisations and managers during early period of the pandemic, ranging from individual personal care to online social activities:

“There has definitely been wellbeing support provided and I have felt very supported by my manager.”

Female, YCS HQ

“My manager has been extremely supportive and considerate to each person's individual wellbeing and any anxieties.”

Male, SCH

“There was a lot of different things happening to keep staff morale up (e.g. quiz and Tik Tok).”

Female, YOI

“Recognition around people's wellbeing and the setting up of the Wellbeing Wizards - a group of staff who volunteered to help navigate through various snippets of information to point us in the direction of looking after ourselves, introduced us to other colleagues and gave up their time to invest in fun activities for us.”

Female, YCS HQ

However, staff from across site-types and head offices who felt less supported described managers not taking their public health or mental health concerns seriously:

“Lack of regard or conversation about risks to staff. Lack of protection or support around emotional impact.”

Female, YOI

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"I do remember telling my manager, "I'm really struggling today" (...) [He replied] "Oh, right, well, shall we talk about this after the next meeting?" (...) And it's never come back to. (...) I don't think managers get enough understanding of [mental health issues], on how to support and how to recognize it actually. I just need them to take the pressure off you a little bit."

Female, YCS HQ

## Support during COVID-19 related personal distress

One in seven staff suffered COVID-19 related personal distress (e.g. **family bereavement / hospitalisation**) (15%, n164). Of those, about three quarters were satisfied with support available through that period (72%).

These staff were over ten times more likely to be satisfied with their support if they felt that management **took public health concerns seriously**. The other predictor was if their particular **workplace was coping well** with the pandemic (in their opinion).

Staff praised the support from managers when their families or friends were ill or died with COVID-19, even when they were working remotely:

"I lost my [family member] and the support I received was excellent from the establishment."

Male, YOI

"I lost my [family member] to COVID after a spell in hospital. Managers and SLT were as supportive as they could be at a distance. (...) I am happy with the support offered."

Female, YOI

## Staff perceptions of children's wellbeing

When discussing what staff had observed of children's experiences in custody during the panic, there was a strong theme across the secure estate that the restricted regime and extended time in rooms put pressure on the children's mental wellbeing. In consideration of this, there was a perception from some that children's mental health (not public health) had not been prioritised in regime arrangements:

"Seems as if the children's mental health needs have not been prioritized."

Female, YOI

A second strong theme from across the secure estate was that children's anxieties had been increased by a lack of certainty around their cases and future, including both interruptions to court dates, and to transitions home or to the adult estate. Staff voiced frustration that communication around these had not been clearer:

"Court cases have been on hold causing distress, and although this is not a problem that the YCS can solve there should be better communications on how the backlog is going to be cleared."

Male, YOI

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“Transferring young people to YOI's has been on hold and there has been very little to no communication about when they will start again, which has caused much anxiety and stress to a lot of young people who have known about their transfer.”

Female, STC

Conversely, staff noted (with some surprise) that they had not seen any negative effects of these stresses on children's wellbeing, in terms of increased self-harm or violence:

“So I think the biggest surprise and I think this goes for the whole of the establishment is I think everyone expected self-harm to go through the roof because you would have young people locked up in the room for a longer getting bored and that would lead to more issues around self-harm, but I think the reality is especially with kids.”

Male, YOI

Staff discussed how changes to regime arrangements across the regime had improved wellbeing and children's anxiety about feeling safe, citing factors such as smaller residential groupings and a slower/calmer regime pace:

“That young people feel safer and generally less stressed under the COVID regime [is positive].”

Male, YOI

“Less stress in work as prisoners [children] are in pods so less bullying, less assaults less stress.”

Female, YOI

“The boys' and staff's overall wellbeing has been so much better. Everything has been a lot calmed due to the consistency and slow pace.”

Female, YOI

## Parents' and carers' reflections

### Children's wellbeing

Overall, there was a dominant theme from parents that their child had coped well with public health restrictions, despite having spent prolonged periods in their room, with parents surprised at their resilience. However, feelings were also expressed that there would be a time-limit to their coping:

“Actually, at the very beginning, we thought, God [isolation in a Reverse Cohorting Unit] was going to be really difficult for him, being sort of on his own for two weeks, away from the other residents. It wasn't that difficult for him, he seemed to do quite well.”

Mother, STC

“I spoke to her two days ago and she was in isolation, so she has a short phone call. I said, “Well, what have you been up to. I'm sure you've been watching TV?”, and she was quite happy. She likes to have her own time anyway so that was fine for her. I think, for it gone on for a few more days and she might have gone a bit stir crazy. But because it was

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only a short time, she actually quite enjoyed it because she gets her own peace and quiet.”

Mother, SCH

In contrast, there was a suggestion from parents that their children may have had **less enthusiasm**, confidence, or self-esteem as a result of the lockdown restrictions:

“In this period of time, it may have had an impact. The way things are working inside, maybe it's not as engaging as it would have been had there been no COVID restriction. Maybe his self-esteem might be a little less diminished, but he has looked to me a little bit like he doesn't care.”

Mother, STC

Furthermore, a subsidiary theme from parents was that children had been **unsettled** by either the uncertainty of the period, unexpected changes in routine at this time or disruption to preparation for release, which can be problematic for children with a traumatic background:

“The changing around him has been unsettling, so if it's been for COVID reasons, then that you understand because, you know, it takes an actual health situation. I do understand that when they have less people, they have to sort of re-juggle things because they can't keep running on two or three kids. The need to try and use their resources, but for [child], the change all the time is unsettling.”

Mother, SCH

“He doesn't know what the plan is you know, if it's not very clear to him and he will have big outbursts because of that.”

Mother, SCH

Parents expressed concerns that the amount of time spent in their room had affected the child's well-being because of the **reduction in social interaction** with other children:

“So he did say he felt a little bit like solitary confinement...At the end of the day he was, yeah, he wasn't able to get out and meet someone so the chances of him contracting it were, were to some extent reduced. So from a COVID point of view it felt, yeah, they would be doing everything they could to protect him. But the downside of that was social isolation.”

Father, SCH

There was also a theme from parents that children had talked to them of feeling particularly **distressed** during lockdown.

“She has had some really down moments in there though, for this was a lockdown, when she's finally crying and she's gonna kill herself. She can't do it there more... There has been more episodes whilst has been COVID.”

Mother, STC

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## Parents and carers' wellbeing

Parents described how the absence of visiting made the experience of the pandemic more difficult for them, with the child's custodial **absence felt more deeply**:

"And so I think our, it was, it was upsetting that we weren't able to go and see him, we'd spent, you know every week, the weekend that we would have done. And so it kind of affected us in that sense, that, that opportunity, was removed to see him every single weekend."

Father, SCH

"Like I feel like I mourn, so like when you mourn a child that's passed or whatever, or some family member, that's how I feel... Because I don't see him a lot because I can't... when they're not there, part of you is missing."

Mother, YOI

There was a subsidiary theme from parents of feeling **anxious or frustrated** because they were not able to see and help their child during the dangerous pandemic:

"I think as a parent we have to reassure our kids because we're the adults? I mean, we're as scared as them but we, I suppose, have to show the least fear and as much knowledge about COVID as we can (...) You know, a mother, her first instinct is to protect a child. That's your first instinct. So, not being able to get to him, I think that brought on a lot of anxiety and stress, sleepless nights."

Mother, SCH

Reflecting comments from children, parents stressed the frustrations (for both them and the children) of not being able to have physical contact, either because of a lack of visits or **physical distancing during visits**:

"It's really hard for her because that was her one thing that she looked forward to every week...even if she was having a crappy few days, and she'd always focus on "I'm gonna see my mum or my sister". (...) The only thing she wants is mum, [she says] "I just want a hug from you" (...) The time I did go to visit it, it was awful, because she was like behind a plastic screen. So I couldn't give her a cuddle, or I couldn't give her a kiss."

Mother, STC

Parents were clear that the **communication and support** parents received from custodial staff helped to control their anxiety:

"Sometimes I find, when I'm a bit upset about certain things, and she's [caseworker] like, "No, no, this is fine. I'm here for you as well. You know, we're not just here to support [child]. We're here as a family unit". And she's really good. She's really good."

Mother, STC

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“Where he is, they kept me very updated (...) And as changes came into place, they were always like on a weekly basis, I would say they would call me probably twice a week and so forth... And let me know how he is. Let me know what's going on regarding the COVID. So, yeah, I was well informed and that helped to bring my anxiety down.”

Mother, SCH

## Senior leaders' reflections

### Children's wellbeing

Senior leaders were very conscious of the **particular difficulties** that lockdown might bring to a group of children in custody who already have complex wellbeing needs:

“These children have got a lot of stuff to contend with and COVID doesn't make it any easier. And we know that obviously this is causing an increase in mental health issues across the population, let alone among those children.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

There was some concern among senior leaders that the policy focus centrally had been more on protecting children's physical health than mental health and wellbeing during lockdown:

“There have been opportunities in the development of mental health that we might not have grasped in the way that we could.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

### Staff wellbeing

The stress that working through the pandemic brought on staff was a clear theme from senior leaders. They noted how working was particularly **stressful and draining** on staff during an outbreak:

“At one point we had about a hundred and thirty-eight staff off self-isolating and there was a huge impact on us and a few of us left standing were tired and still are, and mentally and emotionally very, very draining. But people won't accept that it is, and won't accept that they are tired.”

Senior Leader, YOI

There was a theme among senior leaders that the **resilience of staff on site was waning** after several months of pressure, particularly with increasing staff absences during outbreaks and 'Track and Trace' isolation. There was some associated concern that staff “burn out” needed more monitoring and support:

“The morale's going down. I think a lack of resilience is contributing to that and feeling burnt out. There's no end in sight.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“I think where we lack is the wellbeing and wraparound staff support services to make sure that people don't burn out.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ



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## Senior leaders' wellbeing

Senior leaders were not positive about how they have managed their own workload and looked after their own mental health during the pandemic. They pointed to the stress at particularly hectic points during the pandemic.

"But during the week, I just try and cram in hours. I think at the worst, (this was probably in April, May, and June so that, kind of, the three lockdown months), I finished the week with 770 unread emails, and I'd been working all week, been on emails all week, sifting stuff out in order to try and deal with things, and that's how I finished the week. And I remember pouring myself an extremely large glass of wine one Friday night thinking, "I don't know, genuinely, what can I do other than work all weekend to try and get through?". I didn't. I just left it until Monday. I kept thinking, "Oh well, if they're really urgent they'll come back to me or go to somebody else". Which is what I did, and I don't think anything bad happened. But that was really grim. It's a bit better now, but there were times where I was like, "This is just ridiculous". [I didn't go to my managers or colleagues because] I think people will think I can't do my job."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

However, the stronger narrative was about the **longer-term draining** effect on their mental health, both from delayed impact of the acute stress and the prolonged pressure as the pandemic continued on, particularly citing difficulties over ensuring a positive work-life balance:

"It doesn't feel like you work from home anymore. It feels like you live at work."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

"I think we probably carried a lot of anxiety and never expressed it and never really thought about it. And I think that manifests itself at a later time."

Senior Leader, YOI

"[We've] responded really well to covid to a point, but equally I think really struggled in terms of the size of the organisation and the workload that we experience and still experience (...) You can do something for three months, but when it just becomes the norm, that's when it can become quite difficult to manage."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

"I would like a real acknowledgement of how tiring it's been. There's something about energy suffering about this situation, and I think I feel it on a personal level. I feel my energy being sapped away from me."

Senior Leader, YOI

Senior leaders discussed **particular pressures** that they found taxing during the pandemic. For example, senior leaders in YCS headquarters found themselves in the middle of political pressures while trying to do the right thing, and site leaders found themselves more explicitly responsible for the life and death of staff and children in their care:

"We're saying, on one hand to the [union], "We want to do this because it's the right thing to do it", but on the other hand, we're having a conversation with our Children's Commissioner who thinks that we're awful and we're in the business of locking children up

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for 23 hours a day and not doing anything about it. (...) And that takes its toll. We've been talking about that and what that means for us and think about how we can look after each other. I think this is, this is a really difficult and it is, you know, it has turned into a very long time and we're all looking at another six months of this. (...) It's a pretty important question because they're having so much ethical and moral, kind of weight."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

"All your decisions that you're making are based around the safety of everybody. So that's a huge responsibility."

Senior Leader, YOI

"You think you've done everything. But actually, somebody still might die. And can we then, if that really got looked into, absolutely be able to say we did everything we could? You don't know so until it happens sort of thing. So, yeah, I do have that worry and like the pandemic, that comes in waves, depending on where we are, where the country is, what the advice is at any given moment."

Senior Leader, SCH

There was a theme from senior leaders that they felt like they did not have, or could ask for, as much **wellbeing support** as other staff:

"Did we as an organisation expose people without really giving that support? For me, that's how I feel now, reflecting on it, I don't think we really thought about the consequences for those people enough. I think we probably did for our general staff, but I don't think we particularly did that very well for our leaders. (...) We just assumed and expected our leaders to just carry on without saying, 'How does that feel for you?'."

Senior Leader, YOI

"We get messages to say, "Look after yourself and well-being is important", but actually, the work doesn't slow. The demands of the role, the accountability doesn't shift. Like, it's kind of saying "Take care of yourself, but make sure that nothing slips", and some senior leaders don't feel able to do both of those things."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

## External stakeholders' reflections

### Children's wellbeing

There was a theme among stakeholders that in focusing on the priority of public health, the youth secure estate may have **not focused sufficiently** in policy or practice on children's mental wellbeing. There was recognition that this was in hindsight and that decisions were made with the best intent:

"I think decisions have been made the best interests of children, I just think we didn't think about the interests of children to include mental health and wellbeing and wider social health and social aspects. We were overly focused on managing the pandemic."

Governance body

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“[YCS] has almost done too good [on public health] in that it then sacrifices the other element of safety, which is about children’s wellbeing. Children are at increased risk of that side of things, the kind of mental health impacts and even just long-term development stuff without having enough access to people and things. They have tried really hard, and I know things are improving.”

Governance body

However, there was also a subsidiary view that even with this imbalance, the pandemic still saw the increasing development of a **more child-centred approach**, with support for children who found it difficult to cope:

“There's been a real push to look out for the welfare of those kids. So I think that's really important and it's been demonstrable that has happened, certainly. But I would say that there's still kind of a bit of a push to go before I'd say that it was a Child First.”

Governance body

“I’m quite confident that [sites] put in quite a bit more emotional support for some of those children and young people.”

Representative organisation

In addition, there was a view that essential **safeguarding was still operational** and effective during this time:

“In terms of whether a child’s needed to go on an ACCT [safeguarding plan] or they need to see health care, it's not changed because of COVID. There might have been a slightly longer delay because of different things, which is a bit like the resettlement meetings taking place, but I do think on the whole, it feels like they've tried their best to safeguard the children in their care.”

Representative organisation

## Children’s coping

There was a mixed sense from stakeholders of the effects of the pandemic on children in the secure estate and how well they had been coping with restrictions. There was recognition that some children, with particular vulnerabilities, have found the period **very challenging to cope** with feeling frustration, boredom and isolation:

“The children were frightened during this period [we could see] just through some of the comments we had from them. So, absolutely it’s not good for people’s good mental health to be kept in cells for so long.”

Governing body

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"I'm worried more about the longer-term impacts on our children's mental health. There's a lot of time to think and reflect isn't there, when you're on your own in a room? You know, and if we think about the trauma and the neglect that, virtually all the children in custody will have experienced, you know, (...), I think it's been incredibly difficult for some of our children. It's certainly been difficult for some of them who have been on remand, for example, for longer than would be under normal circumstances and then not being able to have direct contact with your family."

Representative organisation

"There are serious child protection concerns raised by the isolation, which we know can lead to irreversible psychological harm (...) I have had a boy in YOI who said it was really affecting his mental health and it's bringing back flashbacks and things like that. (...) I've come across a child in STC who was so bored of being alone, she told me that she swallowed a battery just to get out to hospital. And then, of course, then ended up kind of being back and 14 days isolation. So, this suggests to self-harm the kind of comes out of boredom and frustration and sort of just to make something happen. I have come across a few examples of that."

Third sector service provider

However, there was a contrasting reflection from other stakeholders, that children had generally not suffered acute mental health difficulty, but that it was more **lower-level well-being issues** of "feeling really low". The point was made that metrics collected centrally at present would not capture this non-acute wellbeing:

"The biggest discrepancy is the misconception that mental health is a major problem amongst prisoners [children] because they're being isolated or banged up for so long. That's not what I'm getting told, what I'm getting told is we like this regime because it's stable. There's lots of staff around and we feel safe. I'm not getting told I can't cope, I hate being banged up, I'm getting told, "I'd like to be out my cell a bit more, but I understand why you're doing it." But I'm not getting anyone saying, "It's making me feel suicidal". Nothing at all like that."

Representative organisation

"From conversations with young people, certainly they've not been talking to us about self-harm as such, but just talking about feeling really low and feeling lonely and isolated. I feel sometimes the metric used by YCS to measure how good or bad well-being or mental health concerns are within an establishment are really acute."

Governance body

## Early release scheme

There was widespread **disappointment** (and some cynicism) among external stakeholders at the failure of the Ministry of Justice's early release scheme, which was introduced during lockdown for children's wellbeing, to operate as intended:

"I think that's just a headline from the government about ROTL [Release on Temporary Licence] and early release. I think there's probably been about two or three in the Youth

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Custody Estate who were subject to early release. Nothing's changed. I think it was just a big headline grabber."

Representative organisation

There was a subsidiary theme that this failure was an example of children suffering because the youth estate had been **subsumed into adult-focused policymaking**, based on the needs and circumstance of the adult estate, rather than being looked at differently for children:

"Not a single child, as far as I'm aware, is under the early release scheme (...) That's another example of YCS being subsumed under the big picture. It ought to have been able to have a separate scheme for children which would have allowed any child who could have been safely released to be released on a temporary basis. And if they couldn't go home, to write to the Director of their Children's Services and ask them to put something together."

Third sector service provider

"If there was a sort of implied criticism in what I'm saying, it was that actually at that point they were following the adult estate. So that policy had been set for adult offenders and for the YCS to step outside of that would have created ripples that that were too big for HMPPS to live with. I think so. It was that sort of one size fits all. So they were in the space, and this is what's been decided that's not going to move."

Governance body

However, the view from a governance body was that the lack of children released had more to do with Ministers being risk-averse in relation to public protection and that whatever the criteria, children with violent offences would never have been released early:

"Because fewer children go into custody, it does tend to be children who do pose a risk that tend to go to custody and therefore, once you apply that [public protection] test and various other tests that we went through, (...) hardly any children actually came through that filtering process as eligible for release. (...) I'm not aware of anything that the YCS could have done to release more children. (...) I think the main reason that the emergency release didn't work was it was about risk aversion and public protection, and I don't think Ministers were particular persuadable on that point."

Governance body

## Summary

The large majority of **children** across YCS felt they coped well, and that lockdown had been "fine" for them. Most children even found some positives. However, almost half of children were more anxious or miserable at times because of the lockdown situation, and almost a third often felt alone. How easy or difficult a child found this period depended on a few consistent factors: how tough they found visitor restrictions, having enough contact with family, having access to activities, supportive staff, a culture/environment quiet enough to sleep, and whether they had additional health or learning needs. Nevertheless, most children felt supported during the pandemic, with three quarters finding it easy to speak to someone about how they were feeling.

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This was also linked to family contact and encouraging staff relations, but also having a sense of agency.

Although most **staff** showed resilience and even saw positives to the situation, a third were concerned with their stress levels. The most consistent predictors for staff positive wellbeing and coping were whether they were concerned about public health arrangements, whether they were achieving a positive work-life balance, and whether they felt there was adequate wellbeing support from managers. Factors affecting staff work-life balance included management support/communications, and changes in working arrangements. For off-site staff, while remote working was generally beneficial to their wellbeing and work-life balance, negative pressures came from home responsibilities and increased management expectations (real or perceived). For site staff, pressures came from extra work covering isolating/shielding colleagues. The large majority of staff were satisfied with wellbeing support. The strongest predictors of satisfaction were whether managers were seen to take their public health concerns seriously and communicate well with them.

Site staff were concerned about seeing the negative stresses on children's mental wellbeing of both regime restrictions and criminal case interruptions. However, they noted reduced self-harm and violence, which they related to feeling safer through smaller residential groups and a calmer regime.

**Parents and carers** generally felt that children had coped well with public health restrictions, including spending prolonged periods in their room, but some parents described children having less confidence, being unsettled or distressed. Being unable to visit their children during lockdown made their absence in custody harder to deal with, although regular communication and support from staff could make this easier.

**Senior leaders** were conscious that children with particularly complex needs may find lockdown even harder, and there was concern about the balance between public health and mental wellbeing. They recognised that working through the pandemic, particularly during outbreaks, was stressful and draining for staff, and that their resilience was waning over time. Senior leaders in headquarters and sites were negative about how they had managed their own workload and mental health during the pandemic, noting its longer-term draining effect, with a theme that they did not have, or felt they could not ask for, as much wellbeing support as other staff. They noted particular effects on wellbeing from political pressures and their responsibility for others' lives at this time.

**External stakeholders**, like senior leaders, were concerned that in hindsight the immediate public health priority had led to insufficient focus on children's mental wellbeing. However, there were subsidiary views that essential safeguarding processes were still operational, and that the pandemic saw the increasing development of a more child-centred approach across the children's secure estate. There were mixed views across different stakeholders about how well children coped with restrictions. While there was a recognition that some children found the period very challenging for their mental health, other stakeholders felt that any issues were lower-level wellbeing issues rather than acute. There was widespread disappointment at the failure of the Ministry of Justice's early release scheme to allow children home, with some



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stakeholders seeing this as an example of children suffering from being subsumed into adult-focused policymaking.

## 4. Safety and Behaviour

This chapter explores the experiences of safety and behaviour management for children and staff across the children’s secure estate during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It considers how safe or unsafe individuals felt, whether children felt victimised and felt able to report victimisation, and children’s motivation to behave well.

### Children’s experiences

#### Feeling safe or unsafe

Of children across the secure estate (N391), one in seventeen (6%) felt **unsafe from others’ harm** during the lockdown (not including safety from COVID-19).

There were significantly and substantially fewer children in both YOIs and STCs who felt unsafe from others’ harm at some point during the lockdown compared to before – down 29% points in YOIs, down 24% points in STCs (see **Table 4.1** for comparisons). Children who had been in similar sites before confirmed this reduction in feeling unsafe: one in five (20%) felt safer from harm during this period and only a small proportion (4%, n10) felt less safe.

Across the secure estate, five children reported that they felt “unsafe now” (1%). The proportion feeling “unsafe now” in YOIs was significantly lower than previously (numbers too low for significant difference in STCs).

Unsurprisingly, the strongest predictors for children feeling unsafe during the pandemic were having feeling victimised during that period (verbally abused, assaulted, or bullied), with feeling victimised by staff slightly more important than feeling victimised by children. Children who **felt victimised by staff** were four and a half times more likely to feel unsafe, whereas those who **felt victimised by children** were three and a half times more likely to feel unsafe. Significant protective factors were if the child felt that there are **people in custody who care about them**, and if they were being supported to make positive **personal progress** (e.g. with learning skills for release and positive plans).

Table 4.1: Safety in YOIs and STCs - Proportion of children during the pandemic compared with before

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % before pandemic
Feeling unsafe from others’ harm (not COVID-19)	6%	35%	8%	32%
Feeling unsafe now	1%	9%	No significant difference	No significant difference

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Feeling victimised by children	8%	44%	8%	53%
Feeling able to report peer victimisation	47%	32%	No significant difference	No significant difference
Feeling victimised by staff	6%	44%	8%	38%
Feeling able to report staff victimisation	68%	55%	67%	50%

Base = All in YOIs (n312; 6-9 missing) and STCs (n54; 0-4 missing).

Time spent out in or out of rooms was not a significant predictor of feeling safe/unsafe nor of victimisation.

Reflecting the quantitative findings, children in the different types of sites discussed feeling safer and experiencing less conflict during the pandemic period. Children felt able to “chill out” from the usual expectations, allowing the pressure to calm down. It could act as a ‘**circuit break**’ from the usual culture or difficult relationships:

“Before corona had fights and weapons, now given chance for everyone to chill out.”  
18-year-old, YOI

“Since this COVID things happened, there's not been as many first responses, it's actually calmed down a bit.”  
17-year-old, STC

“COVID has definitely been in my favour because before I was well known, and problems followed me inside - at one point the whole jail was after me. But right now it's a little break.”  
17-year-old, YOI

Children felt safer by being in smaller “**family groups**”, and so smaller association. There was less risk of encountering children that they do not get on with, and they did not feel the need to be constantly on alert to danger, nor an expectation to be involved in conflict:

“Yeah yeah, like even on the wing yeah, even if I had problems, with other people on the wing – which I do – they are in their own groups you're in your own groups, like it's very rare that you're going to bump into each other like that.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“Smaller groups are better cause there's less people have to worry [about]. [Previously], you never have peace of mind, every time you're out you kind of watching other people acting, thinking about like making sure you're not saying the wrong thing. More people start fights you know and I'm not trying to get into fights, so.”  
17-year-old, YOI

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“[In family groups], you can sit down and just chill out. See, I got out in the yard with four people I don’t really know, I sit there I chat to them. I step into the yard with 30 man you’re expected to fight, you know what I mean.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Feeling victimised

One in every twelve children (8%) felt **victimised by another child** during the pandemic (verbally abused, assaulted or bullied). Numbers feeling victimised by peers fell substantially from pre-pandemic levels – down 36% points in YOIs, down 45% points in STCs.

The strongest predictors for having felt victimised by other children during the pandemic related to being personally vulnerable or anxious in other ways. Children with **substance misuse problems** were three and a half times more likely to feel victimised by peers, and those **worried** about catching COVID were three times as likely. **Ethnicity** was also significant, with white children more likely to feel victimised than children from black and ethnic minority backgrounds. Unsurprisingly, **getting on fine with other children** more generally was also a protective factor. Finally, having support was important - **being able to speak to someone** about how they feel was a predictor for not feeling victimised by other children.

One in every seventeen children (6%) felt **victimised by staff** during the pandemic (verbally abused, assaulted or bullied). This proportion was significantly and substantially lower than before the pandemic in both YOIs (down 38% points) and STCs (down 30% points).

Interestingly, the strongest predictor for having felt victimised by staff related to sentence type – with children **on a detention and training order (DTO)** being three and a half times more likely to have felt victimised. Significant protective factors all related to support and access to it, including **access to custodial support services** (e.g. felt able to see a nurse or speak to an advocate), **access to family support** (chance to have video calls) and **supportive staff** (e.g. would take their pandemic concerns seriously).

Reflecting the quantitative analysis, children described how being vulnerable left children **open to peer victimisation**, perhaps through ‘taxing’ or bullying

“If I see someone’s weaker can’t stick up for themselves and just go up to him and say, “You’re paying 10-pound canteen, 20-pound canteen, or just get wrapped up”. Personally, I hate people doing that shit because someone might just not have enough money and tax someone and they just fucked. (...) Erm, there’s loads of people that have the gobals to say no, but someone always comes in like, “Oh yeah I’ll pay”, because doesn’t wanna get rushed by the whole wing.”

17-year-old, YOI

However, the **smaller ‘family groups’** were thought to help children getting on better and become closer, which reduced the risk of such bullying:

“Because we’re in a smaller group everybody is, you know, they know each other, they’re more friends, they’re closer. Like I said, they’re more of a family; you wouldn’t really tax your close friend, would you?”

17-year-old, YOI

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Conversely, there was a subsidiary theme from children that victimisation can still occur if children are placed (without consultation) in the “wrong” family group with people who they do not get on with, and speculation that they could start fights deliberately to be moved:

“if someone goes into a wrong group, they’ll get victimised. It’s raa happened like three times this week. If they get put in the wrong group, you get the wrong set of people. Cos you don’t always get to choose.”

17-year-old, YOI

“When a new person comes in and that person doesn’t want to be in a group - so they just have to fight someone in your group so they have to move. You should be able to choose your group so no fights happen.”

16-year-old, YOI

Where there was violence and victimisation during the pandemic, children pointed to escalation from **verbal conflict** from “shout outs” through windows. Children perceived that this was largely from children isolated in their rooms for prolonged periods, either getting bored, frustrated or over-confident because they were not face-to-face:

“[COVID-19] made it a little bit worse (...) Because like before COVID happened, no one would say anything to someone else because they knew the next day they’d see them. So now as COVID happened, they’re like giving a verbal to each other, knowing that they won’t see each other the next day.”

17-year-old, STC

“One person will be shouting at another person downstairs for like a good hour two hours. Because everybody is in their cell they are bored. They egg it on, so like it goes on for even longer.”

18-year-old, YOI

“I’ve been verbally abused - I’m not arsed - everyone is a verbalist - especially when you get covid confident - it’s all out of the window.”

18-year-old, YOI

## Feeling able to report victimisation

Among all children, about half (49%) considered that, if necessary, they would have felt **able to report bullying** by another child. This proportion was significantly higher than before the pandemic in YOIs (up 15% points; no significant difference in STCs).

Significant predictors for feeling able to report peer victimisation were finding it **easy to speak with someone** about how they feel, **staff attentiveness**, and **support with personal plans**. Children who found it easy to speak with someone about how they feel were two and a half times more likely to report peer victimisation. Being **on remand** was a significant factor against feeling able to report peer victimisation.

Among all children, more than two-thirds (69%) considered that, if necessary, they would have felt **able to report victimisation from staff**. The proportion feeling able to report staff

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victimisation was significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels both in YOIs (up 13% points) and STCs (up 17% points).

Significant predictors for feeling able to report staff victimisation were again finding it **easy to speak with someone** and **support with personal plans**, plus feeling **able to turn to staff with a problem**. However, when children had **resided in custody for over 5 months**, they became less likely to report staff victimisation.

## Motivation to behave well

Two-thirds of children reflected that they were making a special effort to avoid any trouble at this time (68%).

The significant predictors for making a special effort to avoid trouble at this time were feeling a sense of **cultural unity**, that everyone was battling the pandemic together, that they saw themselves as **having a responsible role** in protecting the site from COVID, and having a **relationship with staff that encouraged them to behave well**. Each of these factors doubled the odds of them making a special effort.

More than two-thirds of children (70%) felt that their relationship with staff during COVID-19 had encouraged them to behave well, with a similar proportion of children (67%) noting that staff had let them know when their behaviour has been good. In YOIs, the proportion of children who felt staff had let them know when their behaviour was good had doubled from before the pandemic (63% vs 32%) (**Table 4.2**).

About three in five children (59%) felt that the rewards for behaviour during the pandemic had been fair. The proportion was substantially higher than before the pandemic in both YOIs (up 28% points) and STCs (up 50% points).

**Table 4.2: Encouraging good behaviour in YOIs and STCs - Proportion of children during pandemic compared with before**

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % before pandemic
Staff have let me know when my behaviour has been good	63%	32%	No significant difference	No significant difference
Rewards for behaviour have been fair	54%	26%	71%	21%

Base = All in YOIs (n312; 10-27 missing) and STCs (n54; 0-4 missing).

Reflecting the quantitative analysis, a dominant theme in the narrative from children pointed to the importance of particular staff encouraging them to behave well through positive reinforcement. Any discussion of their positive behaviour is usually accompanied by a reference to how a particular staff member has praised or said they are proud of them:

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“Yeah - stayed out of trouble. I ain't got in trouble yet. My case worker has been blowing my trumpet and that. I've had no proper nickings.”

17-year-old, YOI

“They are praising us for the things that we do good - it makes me feel good and it's nice to hear.”

16-year-old, YOI

In contrast, there was a smaller theme that bad behaviour could be recognised more than good behaviour, both in comments and in rewards:

“Never - I don't think they've ever done that [told me my behaviour has been good].

There's definitely no praise - you only get told when you've been naughty. So I suppose if you haven't had staff tell you off, you've been good. Silence is a good thing.”

17-year-old, YOI

“They don't give us rewards for our behaviour. I'll be good and that, and they don't say shit, why the fuck am I gonna listen.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Staff experiences

### Feeling safe from others' harm

Of staff continuing to work with children during the pandemic (n617), seven in ten (70%) felt safe from others while working.

The strongest predictors for feeling safe from harm were **also feeling protected from COVID-19, positive relationships with children, feeling supported**, positive about their **work progress** (work improvements), and not identifying as providing a **disciplinarian role with children**. Staff with a positive relationship with children, feeling respected by them, were more than four times more likely than others to feel safe in work. “Disciplinarians” were almost 50% less likely to feel safe.

### Feeling less safe than before the pandemic

Of staff who had also worked directly with children before the pandemic (n576), about one in seven (15%) felt less safe from others' harm now than before. Staff in this group were significantly more likely to have poorer **relationships with children**, poorer **relationships with staff**, felt **unprotected from COVID-19**, and felt **unsupported**. Indeed, staff who felt that they had a good relationship with children were 87% less likely to be in this group feeling more unsafe.

In discussions, there was a perception from staff in this group that **children took advantage** of the pandemic situation. It was argued that reduced searching because of social distancing measures was being “exploited” by children, and that staff were not safe because children were increasingly not being punished enough. This perhaps explains why staff who saw their role as “disciplinarian” and those with poorer relations with children were less likely to feel safe:



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“There have been reductions in the level of searching and general security of the establishment which the young people have exploited to assault staff more.”

Male, YOI

“Too much violence towards staff will little consequence.”

Male, YOI

“During the restriction, we've had more assault on staff and that is a major concern. I do not want to believe this is because boys haven't got more time out but is it absolutely because boys knows there wasn't much consequences for their action. (...) Staff assault has been on the increase, and the management care less about issues surrounding staff.”

Male, YOI

The quantitative findings suggested that feeling unsupported by management was a predictor for when staff felt unsafe. As suggested by the above security staff member, this appears to relate to their concerns that **managers are more concerned with the children** than staff - although the deliberate choice of the term “prisoners” and resistance to “child” below perhaps reveals a ‘prison culture’ basis to the difference:

“Senior management have been far more interested in the prisoners then the staff. There has been an obsession with forcing the term “child’ on staff. There have been record breaking assaults on staff, and the response to these incident have been sporadic. Some prisoners have been transferred out others have been returned to the house block from the seg. This has resulted in staff being even more miserable and has taken a massive impact on staff morale, which in turn has impacted on their mental health. (...) There has been a number of staff applying for other jobs and a large number actively looking to leave once the covid situation is over.”

Male, YOI

## Feeling safer than before the pandemic

Of staff who had also worked directly with children before the pandemic (n576), more than a quarter (29%) felt safer now than before.

Apart from **line management** responsibility (which may link to feeling empowered), significant predictors of staff feeling safer were all related to perceptions of improved work culture and relationships. These included perceiving **support for children’s positive development**, improved **staff-children relationships**, improved **work culture**, and improved **work practice**.

Feeling safer than before was certainly a strong theme among discussions with staff who continued to work with children during the pandemic, across all types of site. Essentially, came down to a **reduction in violent incidents** that put staff and children at risk.

“There have been far fewer incidents, in general, but especially where restraint has had to be used; this had led to a greater feeling of safety for children and staff alike.”

Female, SCH

“The environment have been safer for young people and staff because of a reduction in violent incidents.”

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Male, STC

The most dominant theme from staff explaining feeling safer concerned **improved staff-children relationships**, largely put down to two factors. First, staff discussed how regime organisation during the pandemic allowed the **time and space** to interact more with children, leading to more positive relationships.

“The regime has been able to make everything less rushed and time constricted. This in turn has allowed things like CuSP [personal officer scheme] to be completed fully on the unit and again staff have enjoyed this. Not having to rush from one thing to the next has helped everything feel safer and more controlled.”

Male, YOI

Second, YOI and STC staff in particular consistently referred to the advantages of organising residences into **smaller ‘family’ groups** in permitting better interactions and feelings of safety:

“It has allowed me to not only do my job safer and I have been able to build better relationships with the young people. It is easier to speak with them in smaller groups rather than trying to get amongst 20 young people at times.”

Male, YOI

Reflecting quantitative findings, there was a subsidiary theme that everyone was safer because the **work culture and practice had improved**, with staff pulling together in a time of crisis:

“Certain staff have adapted and pulled together to deliver safe and effective results for the staff and young people.”

Female, YOI

“The staff have pulled together, and this has been reflected in the young people’s behaviour, i.e. less physical interventions, good work ethic.”

Male, SCH

“Staff have time to reflect and engage in reflective practice. Relationships have improved- statistically in all site incidents are down. This is no coincidence, but is due to the way we have worked throughout lockdown.”

Male, YOI

## Perceptions of children feeling safer

Relatedly, staff consistently noted it seemed that **children also felt safer** during the lockdown period. On the surface, this appeared to be because they were separated in their rooms for longer. But on reflection, staff were again able to point to regime factors such as a calmer and more **private space, structured and individualised regime**, and **smaller groups**:

“Feedback from residential staff is that the young people appreciate the time in their own space. They feel less stressed and are then calmer.”

Female, STC

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“Children felt safer, ability to follow regime better, in a more predictable way.”

Female, YOI

“As the regime is slower, there are less discipline issues. Staff and young people feel safer.”

Male, YOI

“A lot of behaviour prior to this was frustration from the young people and having seen them over this period it appears to have reduced. I feel like there was always so much to fit in prior to COVID that the bits that were important to the young people got missed or not had time to be explained. Young people also seem to be responding to the family bubbles really well.”

Female, YOI

“The relationships between staff and young people have improved as staff are able to interact with the young people in smaller groups, where the young people feel safer and their concerns more listened too.”

Male, STC

“The young people have also felt safer in small groups and have stated on many occasions that they prefer it. This has led to levels of violence decreasing and created a calmer more caring and engaging environment to work in.”

Male, YOI

“[With smaller groups], there's not really any issues between the kids on any units at the minute, I don't believe, especially the unit I work on. It is more like brother, sister relationships where you'll have a little argument go off of your little tantrum and come back and everything's back to normal again. There isn't a problem because the lower numbers, it probably is more like a family environment. They probably learn a lot more, see what it's like and how to sit down and have a meal together and interact, and discuss how you're going to pick a film to watch, and what is suitable for who, and who wants to do, and learn how to negotiate, and learn how to accept one another differences.”

Female, SCH

Staff noted that feeling safer in smaller groups allowed children to **“let their guard down”** – echoing children's accounts of less hyper-vigilance. As a result, children were more likely to **talk to the staff more** and improve their relationships, less likely to be involved in disruption or violence, and have improved mental health.

“Young People work better in smaller pods than they do as a whole unit, they feel safer, let their guards down and speak to staff more.”

Male, YOI

“That smaller groups of young people enables them to feel safe and in return there has been a huge reduction in violence.”

Female, YOI

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“They feel safe in smaller numbers which has a direct impact on their behaviour and mental health.”

Female, YOI

Specifically, there was the observation that smaller groups (in residences and classrooms) also allowed **staff to work in different, more individualised, ways** with children – which again, may have been a factor in reducing any disruptive incidents. Continuing this circle, children feeling safer then improved opportunities for effective working with children:

“Smaller groups of young people has allowed for alternative models of working and reduced the number of violent incidents occurring.”

Male, YOI

“Smaller classes make learners feel safe and they engage more with me.”

Male, YOI

## Parents’ and carers’ reflections

There was a theme of relief from parents of children in YOIs that lockdown meant their children were safer from violence. They perceived that the site restrictions during the pandemic meant that they were more protected from others and the wider culture, whether by being in their rooms or in smaller groups.

“Because he was isolating himself from the others just to stay away from all the trouble. And just to get his nut down and get out. With COVID 19 coming about. It’s done him a favour. Because everyone’s been locked down so no one can get at anyone.”

Father, YOI

“So one of the things one of the positives I think about the COVID situation is (Child’s name) has talked about the fact that, you know, they’re now in groups of eight on the landing. So they’re segregated into little bubbles rather than the whole landing mixing together and he said that makes him feel a lot safer. He said, you know, he just thinks there’s less opportunity for conflict and for the issues to arise when you’re in a smaller group.”

Mother, YOI

## Senior leaders’ reflections

Senior leaders noted the **increased safety**, and feelings of safety, for children during the pandemic. There was a very clear sense that increased safety for children was not due to more time in their rooms, but a **change in relationship dynamics** within institutions (particularly YOIs). Generally, this was put down to the move to organising children into smaller single-figured ‘family groups’ in residences and in activities:

“If you do have more of a restriction on the regime, then you have less opportunity, perhaps for conflict. But also small groups help that. (...) I think the key thing is

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relationships. (...) I genuinely think at the end of the day, it's that old fashioned stuff of relationships will help make somewhere safer."

Senior Leader, YOI

"Violence has been a fraction of what it was last year, for instance. (...) Even though we've had some violence and some use of force, it certainly hasn't been at the level it was previously. Boys are more engaged and more willing to work with us. (...) It brings different dynamics when a group of three have been together for two or three or four months. So they become more like siblings and those petty squabbles and arguments that are over nothing as opposed to the stuff I suppose we were dealing with before, which was more organized, peer pressure, gang related kind of issues."

Senior Leader, YOI

"[Previously] we are taking teenage children and putting them in a very false environment, because when you look around, you don't see groups of 30, 40, 50, 60 children mixing together. It doesn't happen. Even in schools that doesn't happen, yet that is what our environment forces our children to do. And then we all start to question, "Well why do they feel scared and intimidated and threatened?". Well, because we're putting them in a false environment; an environment where they're constantly having to look over their shoulders. Whereas, if we were working with them in small groups, as we have been doing..."

Senior Leader, YOI

Again, putting it down to **smaller groups**, senior leaders were clear that the increased feelings of safety among children had led to **reduced anxiety and more engagement** in meaningful activities:

"I think we are really pleased that during COVID we've taken some learning certainly the way that we're managing the (small group) bubbles now across the centre. I think that managing the boys in much smaller groups had had a huge effect on their levels of anxiety because the issues about gang affiliation, while they haven't gone away, they've significantly reduced. (...) Huge improvements that we've had in terms of the levels of violence, the reduction in anxiety that we've seen from the boys, and most importantly their increased engagement in education because the boys are not sitting in education in larger groups where the kids sat behind are going to assault [them] at some point during the lesson, so they are engaging."

Senior Leader, STC

"We've got some stuff that we weren't expecting. Some of the children almost became children again – you know, they lost their fear of having to be unlocked as a whole wing and move to activities as a whole wing. (...) Going to small groups they felt safer initially for sure. (...) Some teachers are saying it's much easier (...) And, you know, people feel safer."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

Furthermore, it was argued that when children felt safer, this led to **staff also feeling safer**:

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“For children, levels of self-harm and violence are down, levels of separation are down. So all of those are indicators of feeling safer, and they would say that they felt safer during that time, and I think that impacts on how staff feel also.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

However, there was a subsidiary concern (heard from senior leaders in YCS headquarters, not sites) that operating with **smaller groups may have caused other issues**, such as divisions between groups and children not being able to deal with conflict:

“What used to be individual ‘keep-aparts’ has changed into group ‘keep-aparts’. Every site has a real reluctance to move family groups around unit if a door is open in case they fight. (...) That’s just ridiculous and it’s not rehabilitative. It’s not enabling the growth of a child to understand how to deal with conflict, to tolerate children living with others. They’re not going to be able to manage if they transfer to the adult estate.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

The decision to suspend the incentives and earned privileges scheme (IEP) for **behaviour management** in YOIs received a welcome among YOI senior leaders. However, it was noted that YOI staff were finding it difficult to know how to manage children’s behaviour in its absence; there is the claim below that the IEP suspension led to increased adjudications. However, it is noted that sites also had the opportunity to experiment in moving away from the traditional adult-based adjudication process to a more child-centred system, which it is argued has improved behaviour:

“I think we should get away from the IEP scheme for our estate. I don’t think that adult model system is kind of fit for purpose. Not taking TVs away from the boys has been really good.”

Senior leader, YOI

“So conflict has probably been managed by moving children, and family groups, rather than through conflict resolution. Adjudications have been far fewer for the judge because that got reduced right at the beginning, (...) but there are probably adjudications that were for more minor incidents that you would have got because of the central decision to spend IEP, which was actually to suspend basic and to suspend the removal of televisions (...) We took the decision to suspend IEP so we weren’t even, in all of our sites, allowing boys to progress up, which was very odd and I was getting told it’s because we’ve suspended IEP and I’m like, you know, “We haven’t suspended incentivised regimes”, but we had to do quite a lot of work around that; the staff felt that they had no tools to manage behaviour.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“We’ve moved to more of a restorative adjudication process and that’s really helped as well. We’ve been able to experiment a bit with that, you know it’ll take a while for that to kind of really imbed and kind of us to get it right. But I think that’s helped. And also, we are doing things we should have always done; what’s the point of removing a TV for most of our lads? You know, I don’t think there’s much of a point. Although some of the staff can say, “We don’t have a clear process for those at the moment that are really misbehaving”



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But actually, we are doing some of the sanctions stuff differently and we're seeing the benefits of some of that. And any flags around persistently misbehaving, there's normally a clear reason why, we can explore that a bit more and we've had some time to."

Senior Leader, YO1

## External stakeholders' reflections

### Improved safety

There was a dominant theme children were being kept, and feeling, safer from violence during the pandemic. It was widely considered that this was not because they were in rooms longer but as an effect of being organised in **smaller 'family' groups**:

"Previously, prior to COVID, there were lots and lots of young people who were vigilant, they were scared. And they were often associating in really large groups. What large groups do you know in the community that associates in groups of 30 or more? I think some of the things that can be learned from this period is actually encouraging and enrichment and association time in perhaps smaller groups. (...) Minimizing the extent to which they need to be vigilant and say in a situation in small groups, I think is a valuable lesson that can come out of this lockdown. I don't think that the lesson is keeping children locked up alone in their rooms, for 24 hours a day is the lesson that's emerging."

Third sector service provider

A number of reasons were given for the positive effect of smaller groups on safety. First, it was argued that this was as the result of better staff-child ratios for children out of rooms at any one time:

"The key for me is to reduce those prisoner staff ratios. So that ratio, that is conducive to their needs, similar to what we have in social services, care, homes, loads of staff around but small numbers of people in our care to look after. So it's the fact that they actually feel safe behind their door because we're not unlocking them in large numbers where they're under threat, where they have to stick the chest out and let the old child bravado, "I'm in a different gang to you so I've got to look as if I'm having a go". They feel safe in smaller numbers, there's more staff around and when they are unlocked (...). So I think by unlocking people in smaller groups, even from rival gangs, if you could then introduce some sort of counselling/ group work (...) and get to the root cause of why they continue that behaviour, and in smaller numbers with more staff we can cope with anything that's thrown at us."

Representative organisation

A second, and more dominant, theme, was that smaller groups helped develop **more positive relationships** between children and with staff:

"It would appear that children seem to feel safer and more secure in a smaller group. The bubbles appear to be a good thing and I think that points to smaller units and how we think about whether there's secure schools or smaller units. (...) So I think it helps point the direction towards smaller being better, more like children's homes, homelier (...) So I think it's that supports policy direction of travel anyway. It feels as if these small bubbles

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have helped and foster better relationships maybe with between children and staff and that's a good thing, but it shouldn't have taken a pandemic, I suppose, for us to be aiming for that."

Governance body

"The key to behaviour management is relationships. So, if they can crack that and they can build on these small groups and on the perceptions of some of these officers, halfway decent incentives, I think there's an opportunity to do something with it. (...) What I would like to come out of this is a different approach to rewards and sanctions. "Are adjudications the appropriate way of dealing with disciplinary hearings for children?" is a question overdue for an answer."

Governance body

## Behaviour management

As the second quotation above suggested, there was a view that the smaller groups and improved child-staff relationships offered an opportunity to develop more effective **behaviour management** and techniques (and some frustration that the opportunity had not already been taken):

"There's been less restraints, but it's still been exactly the same. (...) If we had a child who was in a home with us, as a parent and they didn't want to go into their room to didn't want to comply with something that we'd asked them to do, I think we'd have a conversation about that until it was resolved. However, [in the secure estate], they'll be kind of a five-minute conversation and all of a sudden ten people appear, and they restrain you and put you in your cell and shut the door. That's not looking after children."

Governance body

## Summary

The large majority of **children** across the secure estate felt safe from others' harm (not including infection risk) during the first months of lockdown. Indeed, substantially fewer children than before the pandemic felt unsafe or felt victimised (by other children or staff). However, increased feelings of safety were not related to children spending more time in their rooms. Feeling unsafe was related to whether they had felt victimised by other children or staff, and mediated by feeling cared for. In turn, feeling victimised by other children was more likely if a child had personal vulnerabilities. Both feeling victimised by children and by staff was mediated by feeling that there was easy access to someone who would listen – family, support service, and supportive staff.

Children felt that lockdown acted as a circuit break from negative culture, with smaller 'family' groups improving peer relations and relieving the need for hypervigilance. When conflict occurred, it was felt to escalate from verbal "shout outs" after prolonged periods of being in their rooms. More children than before the pandemic felt able to report victimisation from peers or staff, depending upon how easy it was to find someone to speak with and if they found staff personally supportive in their journey.

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Most children made a special effort to avoid trouble at this time, predicted by an increased sense of cultural unity, feeling like they had a role in battling the pandemic, and encouragement from staff. Experiencing positive reinforcement from staff was doubled in YOIs compared to before the pandemic, and prominent in children's narratives around their improved behaviour.

Most **staff** who worked with children during the pandemic felt safe from the harm of others. Feeling safe depended upon their relationships with the children and colleagues, their role (actual and perceived), and how supported they felt. The most consistently important factor for feeling safe was having a positive relationship with the children. Conversely, being in the small group of staff feeling less safe had poorer relationships with children, considered their role to be disciplinarian, and felt that managers did not support them (or favoured the "prisoners"). The improvement in relationships and associated feelings of safety for both staff and children were felt to have facilitated largely through the organisation of children into smaller groups during lockdown, with the effect that that children were less hypervigilant, and more constructive interaction was enabled.

**Parents and carers** generally felt that their children were more protected from others during lockdown, citing both children being in their rooms more and the smaller groups.

**Senior leaders** considered that increased safety for children during the pandemic was not due to more time in their rooms, but a change in relationship dynamics within sites (particularly YOIs). This was explained by the move into smaller single-figured 'family groups' in residences and activities which, in turn, had led to reduced anxiety, more engagement, and staff also feeling safer. The suspension to the incentives and earned privileges scheme (IEP) for behaviour was largely welcomed; although some felt that staff were finding it difficult to adjust, others felt that moving to a more child-centred disciplinary approach was already proving beneficial.

**External stakeholders** widely shared the view that children were being kept, and feeling, safer from violence during the pandemic. Again, increased safety was considered an effect of being organised into smaller 'family' groups, mainly explained by the more positive child-staff relationships and more constructive behaviour management that this allowed.

## 5. Regime and Activities

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This chapter explores children's and staff experiences of the regime in sites across the children's secure estate during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It considers how children experienced time in and out of their room during lockdown, activities in their rooms, and access to activities outside rooms, basic necessities like showering and meals, and health support. It considers education during this period, including access to education and how staff supported any out-of-classroom education. It also considers staff perceptions about the extent of regime restrictions and the speed of easing restrictions, and how well their workplace was coping during the pandemic, whether children's best interests were being protected, and about the Gold Command Structure operating for YOIs and STCs.

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## Children's experiences

### Time in and out of room

Of children across the secure estate, about three in every five (59%) reported that they had been able to spend more than two hours **out of their room** on weekdays during the restrictions. For children in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs; n312)<sup>1</sup>, this proportion was significantly less than before the pandemic restrictions – down 20 % points (**Table 5.1**).

**Table 5.1: Regime and activities - differences during the initial lockdown, compared to before the pandemic for children in YOIs and STCs**

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % before pandemic
Able to spend more than two hours out of room on weekdays	52	72	(90)	(90)
Able to spend more than two hours out of room at weekends	20	31	89	95
Able to go to the gym or play sports at least once a week	54	43	(59)	(51)
Spend at least some time outside in the fresh air most days	93	55	81	38
Able to access stored property	74	51	85	58

Base = All in YOIs (n312; 8-11 missing) and STCs (n54; 0-7 missing). Numbers in parentheses (=) = not significant difference at p<0.05

Statistically significant predictors for children spending more than two hours out of their rooms on weekdays were **not in a YOI**, staff **responsive** (perhaps indicating staffing levels), and having been **in custody for five months or more**. Children not in a YOI were more than five times as likely to spend more than two hours out of their rooms on weekends.

However, at the weekends, this figure dropped to only one-third of children (34%) spending two hours out of their rooms. The proportion of children spending time out of their rooms at weekends was significantly lower than before the pandemic both in YOIs (down 11 % points) and in STCs (down 6 % points) (Table 1).

Like on the weekdays, significant predictors for more than two hours out of their rooms on weekends were **not in YOIs**, having been **in custody for five months or more**, and **responsive staff**. Children not in YOIs were more than 24 times as likely to be out of rooms for

<sup>1</sup> Comparison figures from most recent pre-pandemic HM Inspectorate of Prisons surveys in each YOI and STC (see Annex A: CoRE Programme Methodology). No data exists for SCHs.

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more than two hours at weekends. In addition, children were also significantly more likely to be out of their rooms if they also had 'enough' to do in their rooms.

Consistent with this range for weekdays and weekends, when children were asked to describe the day previous to the survey, about four in ten (42%) added up more than two hours out of their rooms.

When children discussed the extended time spent in their rooms during the pandemic there was an understandably dominant narrative around boredom, and how it made their days (and consequently, their sentence), seem much longer and more difficult to cope with:

"When you're in a cell, the days just dragging out."

17-year-old, YOI

Time in cells has been raised in considerations across the CoRE domains. In discussions specifically focusing on time in their rooms, children across the secure estate highlighted both the **frustration** noted when reporting on disruptive behaviour (e.g. calling out of windows) and **isolation** noted when reporting on mental wellbeing:

"On the first 2 days we had 15 minutes fresh air, and then for 12 days after told not even allowed out of our rooms. No fresh air. Incredibly difficult time. That was the whole centre, all children."

18-year-old, SCH

"Yeah like, like 14 days quarantine and that like, you might get let out for half an hour a day and that ... Pissed off in my room for 23 and a half hours, bit vexed, innit?"

16-year-old, STC

"Length of time in room, feels like isolation, 23 hours a day, plays on mental health, get frustrated."

18-year-old male, male, YOI

"Being isolated, too much time in your room it's not good."

15-year-old, STC

In contrast to these dominant themes, it is important to note that there was a sub-theme around how time to focus on themselves meant some time and space from the institutional culture. For those children, particularly prevalent in YOIs, time could even seem to go quicker than before:

"It's been quite fun. I like my own space, spending time with myself."

17-year-old, YOI

"It's not that different apart from being in your cell a lot more. I think the time goes quicker when you're inside your cell. I think the time has gone way quicker than before lockdown."

16-year-old, YOI

However, there was a clear sense from children that the longer restrictions went on during the pandemic, the more negative the experience and wellbeing effects became:

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“Initially it was good, yeah. I had a lot of time to myself a lot of time to read, maybe revise, if I wanted to think. But after a while, after a few months, we had too much time to reflect and you run out of thing to do, and you run out of things to think about, and you start overthinking. And that’s when I start worrying about things (...) So eventually it got a bit too much time and repetitive and boring.”

16-year-old, YOI

## Activities in rooms

Two thirds of children (69%) considered that they had enough **activities in their room**. Of those children who had been in similar custody before the pandemic (n252), more than a quarter (29%) felt better able to occupy the time with things to do in their room, although a fifth (22%) felt the situation was worse.

Among all children across the secure estate (n312), the strongest predictor for feeling that they had enough to do in their room was being able to keep in **contact with their family enough** (almost four times as likely to feel they had enough to do). Several significant predictors for enough to do in their rooms related to staff relations and particularly proactive/positive staffing and productive activities, including being **treated as an individual**, **help with future planning**, and **encouragement to do education/training**. In addition, those **over 18** were more likely to feel they had enough to do, as were those who expressed **cultural unity** at this time (e.g. felt all in this together).

Three-quarters reported being able to access their stored property if needed (76%). The proportion of children able to access stored property was significantly higher than before the pandemic both in YOIs (up 23 % points) and in STCs (up 25 % points) (**Table 5.1**).

This mixed experience of the sufficiency of activities in their rooms was reflected in discussions with children. For some children, there was enough choice and “a lot” of activities to keep their interest and make personal progress, which reflected the ‘productive’ significant predictors above:

“They’ve offered me a lot to do - homework, colouring, word searches, DVDs, books. Kinetics and education.”

16-year-old, YOI

However, other felt unstimulated. Activities such watching TV, sleeping and listening to music could help them cope, but children were still conscious that these were not a productive use of their time:

“So we’re watching a lot of TV now so I think we should have some movies and that. Music, a lot of people, that’s a big coping mechanism for a lot of people, music, including myself.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Would like to have more to do than sit and watch TV, feel like I’m going brain dead to be honest. Just wish there was more to do.”

17-year-old, YOI



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“Just staying in my pad all day ... it was just, it was just horrible, you weren’t doing anything at all, you were just sat there, watching TV all day and just eating food, that’s why everyone’s probably put a bit of weight on in there.”

17-year-old, YOI

“All I do is watch TV, chat shit at the window, or do cell workouts, or I’m on the phone - I don’t do nothing else in here.”

17-year-old, YOI

Certain materials, such as those for cleaning and reading, seemed to have particular currency for. Again, these were more productive, and linked to self-improvement (as discussed in the briefing on Personal Development):

“Give us more stuff to clean our rooms with, give us stuff to keep us entertained.”

18-year-old, YOI

“I just started doing things that I wouldn’t normal have done, like reading.”

17-year-old, YOI

Children were reliant on materials being provided from either staff or family. The former was sensitive to staff availability and regime access. The latter was felt to be sensitive to site lockdown policies:

“Again, we had to request for stuff, like we had to ask the staff members can they print some puzzles off. It was alright, but if they were busy we wouldn’t, and then we wouldn’t get our puzzles (...) Yeah, we said, “When you’re finished can you please print some puzzles off?” They said, “Yes”, but then when they finished, they forgot.”

17-year-old, STC

“As of a couple of weeks ago they stopped property being allowed in - if you’re in your room and you don’t have films or books then it’s not great.”

17-year-old, STC

In relation to non-lockdown policies, there was also a subsidiary concern from children that activities were being limited in rooms because of sites’ disciplinary/rewards schemes:

“Now I don’t think it’s fair that you get your TV taken if you’re on Bronze when we’re still basically on lockdown. ... Some people are just in their room going insane, because they have no TV and they are on Bronze. Don’t think that’s fair.”

16-year-old, STC

“Only platinum regime get PS4 in the cell - only every other day. Takes a long time to get up ranking.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Access to activities outside room

Despite these restrictions on time out of their rooms, three in five children (61%) considered that they had good access to **activities outside their room**. The strongest predictor for having

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good access to such activities was not **being in a YOI** (almost four times as likely to have access to activities outside room). Other significant predictors of good access to outside activities included a **positive relationship with staff** (e.g. feeling cared for), also having **enough to do in their room, staff being responsive**, feeling that **behaviour rewards were fair**, and having been **more than five months** in custody.

A similar proportion (64%) felt they had been able to **make their own choices** about what they did each day. Unsurprisingly, the strongest predictor for children feeling able to make their own choices about activities was having **access to activities outside of their rooms** (more than three times as likely to have choices). Other predictors related to their **relationships with staff** (e.g. staff seeing them as individuals) and feeling that **rewards for behaviour were fair**.

When discussing access to activities, children were particularly frustrated about not having access to their gymnasium facilities. As with activities generally, the frustration was greater when children knew that others in the community were able to access facilities:

“Not being able to go to the gym, cos I'd have happily been in the gym near enough every day if I could be.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Want to go back to the gym. In the community gyms are open, but in here they are not.”

17-year-old, YOI

However, children were also concerned about lack of access to other constructive leisure and during a restricted regime, both for their wellbeing and their personal development:

“It made me a bit depressed again, because like I was able to express how I'm feeling because I used to... I play the piano.”

17-year-old, STC

“I have a CuSP [Custody Support Plan] Officer, but I haven't had a session for about two month (...) I've been seeing other people getting CuSP sessions.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Basic regime – showers and exercise in the fresh air

Almost all children (99%) were able to **shower** daily. The proportion of children able to shower every day was substantially higher in YOIs (up 30 % points) and slightly higher in STCs (up 6 % points) than before the pandemic (**Table 5.2**).

The large majority (82%) felt that they had enough chances to get exercise. The small majority (57%) had been to the gym or played sports at least once a week during the pandemic. For children in YOIs (but not STCs), the proportion of children able to use gym/sports at least weekly was significantly higher than before the pandemic (up 11 % points) (**Table 5.1**).

Similarly, more than nine in ten children (92%) had been **able to spend some time outside in the fresh air most days** (not counting time walking to activities). The proportion of children able to spend at least some time outside on most days was significantly and substantially higher than before the pandemic both in YOIs (up 38 % points) and STCs (up 43 % points)

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(Table 5.1). The two significant predictors for children being able to spend some time in the fresh air most days were having enough **chances to get exercise** and **feeling protected from COVID-19**.

It was very clear from children that leaving their room for a shower (if not in-room showers) and some limited exercise in the fresh air were prioritised as the basic regime across YOIs and STCs when everything else had stopped, particularly early in the pandemic:

“The regime was a bit mental, only half an hour yard and your shower.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Literally no positives, literally there’s actually none apart from coming out you room for that little bit of fresh air.”

17-year-old, STC

“I was behind my cell for two weeks straight, obviously I’m still allowed out to like have a shower you know and have exercise and stuff like that so it’s alright.”

17-year-old, YOI

Indeed, reflecting the quantitative findings, children noted that the focus on this basic regime meant that they were having more regular access to both showers and exercise than before the pandemic:

“The up side to [COVID] was [that, previously,] if you were on [exercise] yard and you didn’t have the chance to get shower, you ain’t getting a shower. But now, everyone gets a shower and yard ... Previous, like, if you ain’t got enough time to get in the shower, then you ain’t getting in the shower until the next day.”

16-year-old, YOI

Nevertheless, the limited nature of time for exercise and fresh air (“that’s it!”) and the desire for longer outside was a dominant theme from children:

“You just have to be behind your doors. You can only come out half an hour a day for fresh air. That’s it!”

17-year-old, STC

“We come out for yard and soc, that’s an hour and a half. That’s it.”

17-year-old, YOI

A subsidiary theme from children was that site processes could sometimes prevent activities outside of their room, leading to further frustration. There was also the perception that access to hygiene or fresh air was tied to behaviour or risk:

“The other day went to [unit name] and had a visit - let me have my exercise before my visit, came back to the unit, said I didn’t have a shower. Staff said I can’t do that today.”

16-year-old, YOI

“[I was] involved in an incident today so didn’t come out - didn’t get shower or exercise.”

17-year-old, YOI

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“So I have nothing against the staff again but even that decision, yeah, I don’t know how I how I dealt with it so calmly, I don’t know. Even thinking about it, I actually get mad thinking about it now. I don’t understand why I couldn’t have a shower or why nothing was facilitated for me.”

17-year-old, YOI

Similarly, almost all children had enough clean and suitable clothes for the week (92%). In YOIs (but not STCs), the proportion of children reporting that they had enough clean clothes for the week was significantly higher than before the pandemic (up 22 % points) (**Table 5.2**).

**Table 5.2: Hygiene and health - differences during the initial lockdown, compared to before the pandemic for children in YOIs and STCs**

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % before pandemic
Able to shower every day	98	68	100	94
Enough clean, suitable clothes for the week	91	69	(96)	(91)
Enough to eat at mealtimes most of the time	80	39	85	35
Would have been easy to see the nurse*	84	57	88	68
Would have been easy to see the mental health workers*	85	44	82	45
Getting the help you need (comparison is “have been helped”)**	79	65	76	55

Base = All in YOIs (n312; \*31-56, mainly “Don’t know”) and STCs (n54; 4-9 missing, mainly “Don’t know”). \*\* All those with any health problems in YOIs (n98; 0 missing) and STCs (n25, 0 missing). Numbers in parentheses ( ) = not significant difference at  $p < 0.05$

Four in every five children (80%) felt that they were getting enough to eat at mealtimes. The proportion of children feeling that they were getting enough to eat was significantly and substantially higher than before the pandemic both in YOIs (up 41 % points) and in STCs (up 50 % points) (**Table 5.2**).

## Health support

In terms of health, about two in five children (39%) across the secure estate “**felt really unfit**” during the COVID-19 restrictions. The significant predictors for children feeling really unfit were not having good **access to activities outside** of their room and not **feeling able to easily see the nurse**.

The large majority felt that it would have been easy to see the nurse (85%). The proportion of children who felt it would have been **easy to see the nurse** was significantly higher than before the pandemic both in YOIs (up 27 % points) and in STCs (up 20 % points) (**Table 5.2**).

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Similarly, the large majority felt that it would have been easy to see the **mental health worker** (84%). Again, the proportion of children who felt it would have been easy to see the mental health worker was significantly – and substantially – higher than before the pandemic both in YOIs (up 41 % points) and in STCs (up 37% points) (**Table 5.2**).

Three-quarters (78%) of children reporting health problems (n128) considered that they had been **getting the help they needed** with the problem. The proportion getting this help was significantly higher than before the pandemic both in YOIs (up 14 % points) and STCs (up 21 % points) (**Table 5.2**).

A somewhat smaller majority (63%) of children with any physical/mental/learning needs affecting their day-to-day life (n70) felt that they had sufficient support during the pandemic. A similarly smaller majority (58%) of children with self-reported drug or alcohol problems (n36) considered that they had sufficient support. There was no significant difference in either of these figures from before the pandemic for children in either YOIs or STCs.

Reflecting the quantitative finding of feeling unfit because of lack of access to activities outside their room, children again stressed that they were missing access to the gym in particular as important– in terms of both physical and mental well-being. It was clear that lack of access to the gym removed a coping mechanism for children:

“I love PE so we couldn't do it all. I was literally in the gym all the time before lockdown everything and now put loads of weight on as well as.”  
17-year-old, STC

“The gym is more circuit based, but I'd probably live there - as soon as they open the gym, I'd be out my bed in seconds. The gym is a coping mechanism for me.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“Big issue is gym - we need to let tension out, when I'm angry I like to go gym. And it's good to exercise. It makes you feel like normal, like on the out. It helps with motivation, makes you more focused and happier, especially for the guys with longer sentences.”  
17-year-old, STC

## Access to classroom education

At the time of the survey (end of July to beginning of August), about half of the children (52%) had experienced any **classroom** education since the beginning of lockdown (in March 2020). Two in five children (40%) had the chance to education, but only out of class.

Factors significantly associated with children having classroom education during these early lockdown months were having a fuller regime more generally (e.g. weekly sports access) and continuing case management support (e.g. child knows about their active training plan) (although it is difficult to infer the causal direction).

Although children in Secure Children's Homes received more education than others (71% of SCH children, 57% of Secure Training Centre children, 49% of YOI children), the institution type was not an independent significant predictor for classroom provision.

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In discussions, children noted that the pandemic interrupted progress that they were making in classroom education and more generally in their goals:

“I’ve been waiting for it so long. I worked so hard and everything and then boom. No, you’re not doing here. I was literally... I felt so bad.”  
17-year-old, STC

Apart from its pedagogical benefits, children not in classroom education missed the opportunity it gave them to be out of their rooms, which in turn would help their days in custody go more quickly:

“Education’s like the main time to get out of your cell, so it’s just less time out in a way.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“Missed going to education, cos it makes my time go quicker.”  
16-year-old, YOI

## Access to any education provision

The small proportion of children remaining – one in twelve (8%) - reported that they had no **chance to do any education** at all. For children in both Young Offender Institutions (YOIs; n312)<sup>2</sup> and Secure Training Centres (STCs; n54), this proportion without any education provision was significantly less than before the pandemic restrictions – down 4 percentage points and 11 percentage points respectively (although the comparison item is slightly different, see **Table 5.3**).

**Table 5.3: Education in YOIs and STCs - Percentages in CoRE Child Survey vs pre-covid comparison**

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % before pandemic
No chance to do any education/training (comparison is “not doing”)	9	13	0	11
Staff encouraging to do education, work or training*	52	60	85	82
Base = All in YOIs (n312; 8-39 missing) and STCs (n54; 1-2 missing). Numbers in parentheses () = not significant difference at p<0.05				

Significant predictors for children being provided with at least some form of education were having a fuller regime more generally (e.g. sports access), having been in custody for at least

<sup>2</sup> The comparison figures are from the most recent pre-pandemic HM Inspectorate of prisons surveys in each site (see CoRE Research Methodology at the end). No comparisons existed for Secure Children’s Homes.



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five months, and not serving a DTO sentence. Again, the type of institution was not a significant predictor of some education provision.

However, there was a theme in children's discussions around work provided being generic inappropriate to their individual needs. In particular, children felt that the provided work was too basic, which in turn either reduced engagement or did not take up much of their time:

"Sometimes it can be a bit basic, the activity work you get, it's geared at younger people"  
17-year-old, STC

"Swear down these educations pack are for six-year-olds."  
17-year-old, YOI

"A couple weeks in, Kinetics started coming in and that, they started coming in and they were bring us like some work down. But I think some of the work that they were giving us, it wasn't actually matching our ability, you know what I mean?"  
17-year-old, YOI

"We've not done much in Education, and the work I've done is easy and I've finished in like 25 minutes."  
17-year-old, YOI

## Staff encouragement to engage in education, work or training

Only a small majority of children (58%) considered that they had received encouragement from staff to engage with education, work or training. Indeed, in YOIs, the proportion receiving encouragement from staff fell significantly from before the pandemic (by 8 % points).

Significant predictors for children receiving encouragement for education, work or training were having **health problems**, **site** type (not being in a YOI), having **active case management** (e.g. children aware of training plan), **responsive staff** (e.g. quick to answer call bell), and enough activities **provision in their rooms**.

Reflecting these mixed figures for staff encouragement, children discussed varying experiences of staff encouragement for engaging with education during the pandemic. Notably, the encouragement mentioned by children tended to be from education professionals rather than from caseworkers or residential staff:

"My teacher said she was proud I'd done the work and [that I] actually gave it a go."  
17-year-old, YOI

"Education say if you do it you'll get a green card, but I did it and they didn't give one, and the next time they didn't even bother collecting the work."  
17-year-old, YOI

About a third of children (37%) received help from staff with education, work or training outside of classes.

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The only significant predictor for staff helping with education was whether there was provision of enough activities for children to do in their rooms.

The lack of support from staff generally with education out of classrooms was noted by children in discussions:

“There wasn’t really support innit you just get the work pack and then you just have to figure it out for yourself.”

18-year-old, YOI

However, children did also note how Kinetics education providers coming onto education units to offer some educational support and encouragement:

“Kinetics have encouraged me to do it.”

16-year-old, YOI

“Kinetics have been taking time out of their day to help me with my business work.”

17-year-old, YOI

In addition, children recognised and appreciated when non-education staff engaged with helping them with their education work, which in turn helped them to look to the future:

“Staff always offer me help on this landing with reading etc.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Caseworker helps me to do some work - CSCS notes - so I know what to do, so I can do construction when I’m out.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Staff experiences

### Regime restricted enough?

All staff involved in running the children’s secure estate (N1220 responses) were asked about **restrictions to work activities** and regime during COVID-19. Four in five staff felt that restrictions were just right (82%), with the remainder split over whether these were too great (9%) or too little (10%) [percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding].

There were several protective factors against staff feeling that there were not enough restrictions to their work and regimes during lockdown. Staff were less likely to feel that the restrictions were too little if they felt **safe from harm** and as **protected as possible** from COVID-19. Other protective factors were a **sense of cultural unity** (both staff and children battling the pandemic), **management taking health concerns seriously**, they personally had found the **lockdown fine**, and that they had **management responsibility**.

Where the level of restrictions was supported, staff noted how establishments followed government guidance, as well as reflecting factors noted in quantitative analysis, above: feeling protected from COVID-19, management taking concerns seriously, and good communication:

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"[YOI] were very reactive to changes in government guidelines and proactive to changes to the regime and ways we were in reference to directive from the central team. PPE was sufficient and readily available and overall we adapted very well and kept all informed."

Male, YOI

## Regimes eased too quickly?

Almost three-quarters of staff felt that the easing of restrictions were at the right pace (71%), almost a quarter felt this was too quickly (23%) and a few staff felt it was too slow (6%).

There were several protective factors against staff feeling that the easing of restrictions was too quick. Staff were less likely to feel restrictions were easing too quickly if they were **younger** (under 24yrs), working in **Secure Children's Homes**, felt as **protected** as possible, and were kept **well-informed** about what was going on.

Reflecting the quantitative findings, discussions with staff highlighted the importance of feeling well-informed to their confidence in management decisions on easing restrictions:

"From the information I've been receiving since the start of the pandemic, I have every confidence with the way [YOI] have been dealing with and easing these restrictions."

Male, YOI

"I feel that [SCH] are addressing everything they can in order to get the establishment back up and running to full capacity - for the sake of both children and staff. I feel safety is paramount within the establishment and have been well informed around this during the COVID crisis."

Female, SCH

Concerns about the easing of restrictions being too quick, or coming too quickly, were primarily around public health concern for the staff member themselves, their families, or the children on site. For staff working in city-based organisational headquarters, their concerns focused largely on having to commute back to the office.:

"I feel like there is going to be a second spike, I think we need to wait a little bit longer before easing restrictions."

Female, STC

"When the footfall increases the risk will be heightened in relation to contracting the virus, this is concerning for me as I live with elderly, vulnerable parents."

Female, SCH

"The expectation of those still with high-risk dependants to return to site visits and office working."

Female, YCS HQ

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“It is not just the easing of restrictions in the workplace, it is the expected travel to access the workplace. The public-on-public transport not following infection control guidelines, placing staff at risk travelling to and from work.”

Female, NHS HQ

There was also a strong concern from staff (both onsite and in headquarters) that easing of restrictions too quickly, and without enough reflection, would mean moving back to previous regimes, losing any improvements, missing opportunities to learn and build back better:

“[Easing restrictions too quickly brings] the risk of things just simply going back to how things were before COVID - rather than using this experience as an opportunity to make life better.”

Female, YOI

“Move too quickly back to 'normal' and revert back the way things were done, without trying to make things better.”

Female, YOI

“The way that HMPPS rush through levels of recovery is contradictory to building back better. We only get one chance to recover from this and it is disappointing that 'red tape' prevails, and rather than take time to assess the learning, risks and welfare of CYP/staff we have to create recovery plans that are high-level and pay no attention to building back better.”

Female, YCS HQ

A subsidiary concern was that moving too quickly would risk losing the improvements to safety from harm and reduced incidents for children in custody seen during the lockdown period:

“I think that safety has greatly improved at [YOI] since COVID-19 and the groups were made smaller. To be honest, if we were to revert back to the previous regime then I genuinely believe it would be absolute carnage and very difficult to control. There would be full staff assistance everyday as young people have grown attached to the groups they are in, and you would not know who can mix with who now. The young people seem happy enough with the regime as it is now.”

Female, YOI

Among staff concerned that the pace of easing restrictions was too great, there was a suspicion that this pace of reducing restrictions in offices and sites was being driven by external political pressures:

“They are being driven by political want - I worry we will not give proper consideration to safety because of the political push to get offices open.”

Male, YCS HQ

“I don't think the managers have taken this seriously - they've rushed to get things going again and are only interested in their figures and being ahead of other prisons.”

Female, YOI

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In relation to the process of organising the easing of restrictions, the Exceptional Delivery Model process, there was a theme from staff involved both in headquarters and sites that it was complex and resource-heavy:

“EDM work has been very process heavy and created a huge amount of work for staff.”  
Female, YCS HQ

“The EDM process is complicated and shows a lack of trust in sites to do the right thing and move to a new normal. As usual this is time-consuming with deadlines that are not realistic but all too predictable.”

Female, YOI

## Workplace coping

Nine in ten staff involved in running the children’s secure estate (91%) considered that their own particular workplace had coped well during the pandemic.

The strongest predictors for considering their workplace had coped well focused on management **support**. They were almost eight times as likely to consider the workplace had coped well if they felt that staff were being looked after. Other significant predictors were a sense of **cultural unity** (e.g. all battling the pandemic together), that the **interests of children were always a primary consideration**, they **felt safe** at work, and achieved a **positive work-life balance**.

In discussions, staff noted how the pandemic demonstrated that sites across the secure estate (and those who work and live there) are adept and used to adapting to new challenges and circumstances:

“One thing I’ve learnt over my time in the prison service especially in the youth custody estate is nothing stays the same for very long. We are in a constant stage of change and if I’m perfectly honest with you hardly anything is given a chance to embed hardly anything is given a chance to see if it’s successful before we make the next set of changes. So actually I would say in my experience prison staff are really adept at coping with change.”  
Male, YOI

“I feel that, as a centre, we have functioned as well as we could pre and during COVID, and just deal with whatever gets thrown at us I suppose.”  
Female, SCH

## Perceptions of the extent of children’s regime restrictions

Overall, there was a positive narrative from staff about the way staff responded to changes in regimes across the secure estate during the pandemic. Indeed, this narrative was that most children accepted the new regime and even preferred it, although some have struggled in terms of their wellbeing or behaviour because of restrictions:

“They have in the main displayed really good attitudes towards staff and the limited regime on offer though a small number have struggled and displayed negative behaviours at times.”  
Female, YOI

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The positive narrative around the restricted regime was built on the perception that children seemed calmer and more relaxed. As discussed in more detail below, this to subsidiary themes that children preferred less in education, replaced by more time for individualised staff focus on them, even if this involved more time in their rooms:

“It was nice to see the good communication with the children which allowed them to fully understand what was happening and why. They enjoyed the more relaxed regime.”

Female, YOI

“They appear happier with a more structured regime even if it is less time out of room.”

Female, YOI

“It has also given the young people time to work on individual goals and given them time to reflect.”

Male, STC

A further narrative saw staff minimising the extent of any effect of restrictions on regime, perceiving that children still had access to a full or sufficient activities and support, partly because sites and staff (and children) have adapted well:

“They have adapted the regime well to ensure that all young people still have access to a good regime.”

Male, YOI

“Staff have maintained activities and interventions albeit in different forms for young people so there has been little change to their daily routines.”

Female, SCH

“Good positive response from staff and young people who have tried their best to implement changes in the regime and to make sure this runs smoothly with everyone getting the regime they're entitled to.”

Male, YOI

## Perceptions of children's time out of rooms

In discussions, staff from all types of sites expressed the view that the management and staff had been trying, and succeeding, in keeping children out of their rooms as much as possible:

“[I've been impressed by] the continuous effort made by staff, management, and young people to adapt though out to all of the incremental changes, keeping young people out of their rooms for as much as possible, and all of the hard work to maintain positive physical and mental health to all on site.”

Female, STC

“The staff have really tried their best to work with the boys, building better relationships and trying to make sure they have as much time out of their rooms as possible.”

Female, YOI



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“Young people have had minimal restrictions placed on the amount of time they are able to come out of their room.”

Female, SCH

However, there were two other narratives justifying (or mitigating) children spending longer time in their rooms during lockdown. First, staff (particularly in YOIs) argued that lockdown had shown that the quality of time out of rooms (TOOR) was more important than time out of rooms; sites had been making better use of limited TOOR, with more concentrated purposeful activities and staff interactions rather than loose or unstructured association. Second, staff from all types of sites argued that children preferred more time in their rooms, either because they are teenagers or because it felt safer than an open regime:

“The maximising TOOR approach is no longer applicable, time out of room must be quality time and the quality is much more important than quantity.”

Male, YOI

“We have been out on exercise yards with them, walking them around the pond and grounds. Helping clean and CUSP still being offered in full has meant that children felt safer, and staff had the time to do their role to the full best of their abilities. This has built up trust/respect.”

Male, YOI

“As a teenager i wanted plenty of time in my room, I'd have a lack of motivation for school and other activities and sometimes i just wanted to sleep in the afternoon, so why do we think these teenagers are any different?”

Male, YOI

“Young people are spending more times in their rooms, and they love it. They are more settled, and content and you can speak with them more on a one to one so build up good relationships.”

Male, SCH

“That the young people have appreciated the ability to spend time in their rooms away from the other boys - for some it took away the need to be concerned about their mental and physical safety.”

Female, STC

Nevertheless, there was also a dominant contrasting concern from other staff, both in headquarters and on sites, that children had been kept in their rooms too much and too long during the pandemic, with too little purposeful activity:

“They've been locked up too long without purposeful activity.”

Male, YOI

“I think, going forward, certainly introduce restrictions, but we need to weigh up the damage that it can do to young people if they're being locked up for 23 hours a day.”

Male, YOI

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“Young people being in their rooms for 22 hours a day is damaging to their mental health and development.”

Female, YOI

## Perceptions of children's education

For many children, classroom education was suspended for a substantial amount of time during the first summer of the pandemic. There was clear concern from staff (education staff and others) that children were **missing out on essential education** during this period. This would have an effect on their personal development, including qualifications:

“I haven't been able to teach... low amounts of learner work have been returned and work I sent weekly was very rarely distributed by those on site.”

Female, YOI

“Not being able to attend education I feel some children have suffered not being in the classroom environment.”

Female, STC

“Sadly the YP's are not making progress towards their qualifications due to not being on a pathway at present and no assessments are taking place.”

Female, YOI

There was some frustration voiced from residential staff that they were expected to help children with their **education out of the classroom**, but without the instruction necessary to do so. Conversely, some staff argued that the in-room education delivery had not been developed well enough, including use of technology:

“They provided us with work, but we're not qualified teachers either, so we can't deliver that service to the same level as probably was the education staff can deliver it to. (...) Don't just give us a piece of paper; tell us what you want to actually do with it.”

Female, SCH

“In relation to prospects for children education would be my concern. A number of alternatives in the community were available, google classroom, school education platforms etc. It signifies a change in approach is needed to modernise our provision.”

Male, STC

There was a strong recurrent theme in staff discussions, particularly from education staff, that once classroom lessons recommenced, the **smaller 'family group' sized classes** were beneficial for the children. They felt that it created a better learning atmosphere, improved behaviour, helped engagement, and improved learning (even with fewer hours):

“Now in small groups for two months and the engagement has been fantastic. Their behaviour has been, on the whole, exemplary so they're more likely to achieve.”

Male, YOI

“Group sizes dropping - meaning a much more positive learning environment for young people.”

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Female, SCH

“The learners have benefited from a much more focused learning environment in comparison to pre-lockdown where it seems education was time to just get out of the cell and 'hang out' with their peers. Education has been far more effective with small groups of 3. Fewer quality sessions are far more effective and conducive to the learners achieving their academic and vocational targets. Moving forward this approach should be maintained as working with larger groups is ineffective considering the environment.”

Female, YOI

Overall, there was a strong theme that the lockdown period had shown that **education could be developed differently** and more suitably for the cohort. Staff pointed to how the experience showed the benefits and possibilities of a more blended learning approach (permeating classroom walls), involving more practical activities, more personalised small-group teaching, and having holiday breaks:

“[The experience points to] a distance learning model, rather than purely classroom based, which has had a very good effect. I believe a mixture of the two would be very beneficial moving forward.”

Male, YOI

“To consider the business of the regime and what is provided in terms of education; moving away from classroom-based activities to constructive activities in a small group setting.”

Female, YOI

“Also it would benefit all to maybe close education during some of the school holidays in order to take a collective breath. Easter? Christmas? It has always been said that it is not viable but now might be the time to look at this again.”

Female, YOI

## Positives to reduced regimes

A dominant theme from staff in YOIs was that a less busy formal regime, in particular less education, was beneficial for children. This was both because it gave more time for engaging with other services and interests, developing life skills, and positive informal interactions with staff, other children and families at home:

“Attending education for fewer hours is also a positive as the children engage more and feel they have more time to interact with other services. This has also allowed more areas to be free for gym activities which has been welcomed by the children.”

Female, YOI

“Many residential officers have used the time without the pressures of a full regime to get to know the young people and have supported them to develop day to day living skills as well as helping them to maintain family ties.”

Female, YOI

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"It has allowed us to slow down the regime. Start again and build relationships with the boys. This was something that staff struggled to achieve due to the pre covid regime allowing no time for staff to interact with boys in a positive way. We need to learn from this and build a better regime that reduces reoffending and gives boys a future."

Female, YOI

Relatedly, staff felt that the less busy formal regime, and together with being organised in smaller groups, allowed more tailored attention to children:

"This has given staff time to reflect on what works for individual children not always rushing to deliver a regime that suits the whole group."

Female, YOI

"Due to the limitations of the regime there has been opportunity to engage better with young people on a one to one or smaller group basis."

Female, YOI

## Negatives to reduced regimes

However, there was also a dominant theme from staff that the reduced regime did not afford sufficient purposeful activities and support to children (with some suggestion that 'reward' schemes may have led to even greater restrictions for some):

"[The most negative aspect of lockdown was] not being able to access the full facilities of [SCH] for the young people to enjoy and get constructive stimulation, e.g. being able to use the gym/music studio in care time after education."

Male, SCH

"I have been unable to offer services of worship or run Bible Study group (...) and also found it more limiting to be able to have face to face pastoral opportunities. One young man looked very sad during a recent young person's consultation regarding Worship Services. I asked if he had missed attending and he said he had really missed it. He then asked me if we (Chaplains) had missed him and I told him that we certainly had!"

Male, YOI

"I'm concerned about boys on bronze regime getting less fresh air."

Female, STC

In particular, health staff across different site types expressed concerns that children were not receiving sufficient physical and mental health support because of national public health guidance:

"[Most negative was] not being able to provide all services to young people due to national guidance. E.g. dental reviews."

Male, SCH

"We have not been able to see boys for mental health treatment, only for crisis work and assessments, which is a real cause of concern. Even access to boys for crisis treatment has been difficult to ensure."

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Female, YOI

## Children's best interests always a primary consideration?

Nine in ten staff (91%) considered that the best interests of children had always been a primary consideration during the pandemic.

There were two predictive factors (among all staff) for considering that children's best interests were always a primary consideration. The first factor was if they **worked on operational sites** rather than in an organisation's headquarters (apart from in Secure Training Centres). The second predictive factor was if they felt that management were **looking after staff**.

Focusing specifically on staff who continued to work with children during the pandemic (n617), a similar proportion (90%) considered that the best interests of children had always been a primary consideration during the pandemic.

Among staff working with children, the strongest predictors for considering children had always been a primary consideration were: **improvements in working practice**, confidence in **public health** measures, management **looking after staff**, and **cultural unity** (considering that children and staff were fighting the pandemic together).

Two themes were dominant when staff detailed concerns that children's best interests were not always a primary concern – the amount of time that children were kept in their rooms, and insufficient education (particularly the time it took to restore classroom education).

"It would be disingenuous to suggest that children's interests have been a primary consideration when they have had limited education and have been locked in rooms for so many hours a day."

Female, YCS HQ

"Children's interests and education have been largely set to the side and not given priority and proper attention by education. We could have done a lot more to support the children during lockdown by adapting education delivery for in cell learning and support the young people in making progress."

Female, YOI

"Young boys should not be locked in their rooms for so long. I personally feel that not enough was done to bring education in quick enough."

Female, YOI

Two main arguments were given by staff for children's best interests not being a primary consideration in relation to restricted regimes. The first was that public health concerns were prioritised over children's wider needs. The second was that staffing needs and industrial relations had been prioritised over children's needs:

"I believe the primary focus has been on restricting the spread of COVID-19 amongst YP and staff, this hasn't always resulted in children's best interests been met due to the lack of activities."

Male, YOI

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“Seems as if the children's mental health needs have not been prioritized.”

Female, YOI

“The children have not been at the heart of the decision making, it has been more about staff and pleasing unions.”

Female, YCS HQ

“Alignment with HMPPS meant we locked down too hard and for too long. Worries about union backlash trumped children's rights to education and basic aspects of regime like fresh air. YCS failed to make a strong moral argument early that we needed something different.”

Female, YCS HQ

## Gold Command Structure

For those staff working under a **Gold Command Structure** (and able to address it, n200), a large majority (84%) were satisfied with communication and understood the process (90%). Four in five staff (81%) considered that it benefited their site, and nine in ten (90%) felt that it was needed. Almost half (44%) considered that it made running their site easier, while one in five (21%) found that it made things harder.

There was a frustration voiced from managers in the children's estate that the command structure limited their ability to meet local needs:

“I would not say we have done the job worse but being in a command control way of operating has given us less authority to do things locally.”

Male, YOI

“The governor didn't have the autonomy to run our establishment; everything being escalated and so it's frustrating when a kid is in crisis. I think there's time where we look at the risk and you know think outside the box [to help children in crisis], it couldn't happen and I thought that I was failing.”

Male, YOI

Specifically, there was a subsidiary concern expressed from staff that having the youth secure estate within a wider custodial command structure limited the ability of children's sites to be innovative or meet the specific needs of children:

“My main issue was my disappointment at the organisations 'revert to type' with the type being adult command mode - I think this showed we are not yet there yet regarding a separate children's custody service. The primary concern at one stage was to satisfy the unions within the adult command structure. I think this stifled innovation, union interference limited child focus.”

Female, YOI



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## Parents' and carers' reflections

### Time spent in rooms

Parents described the difficulty for their children of spending extended periods of **isolation in their room** during the early months of the pandemic. There was a strong theme around the **frustration and boredom** that children felt:

"I feel for the individuals that are in there, because that must've been really difficult and also difficult for the staff to manage too when there are kids not having as much freedom as they perhaps would. I know that (child) would struggle as well with not being out come out of his room. He cannot sit still. So, you know, the fact that he's stuck in a room and not being able to do what he needs to do when he's angry or when any of those things, I think that that's been tough for him."

Mother, STC

"I just find like when he goes into lockdown, he gets a bit frustrated, obviously, because he can't move around facility. He was confined to the one space, which is his room and stuff but, that's natural to expect that isn't it really."

Mother, SCH

"He was fine, he was just a bit bored really bored cause obviously he couldn't have any interaction with anybody... He was just telling us he was bored obviously but you could hear the frustration in his voice."

Mother, STC

However, parents also noted the different activities that children tried while in in their rooms, developing **new and unexpected interests** that helped them to cope with isolation and boredom. Parents recognised the effort that staff had made to provide materials for the children:

"He's done some different subjects to what I thought he was going to do, different subjects to what he would have normally done. He's done like Art I would have never thought he'd do Art, he's proper got into it...Stopped his boredom."

Mother, STC

"M: Honestly, they were trying to find different ways of trying to keep him entertained and you know, they'd supply them with art materials."

"F: Yeah, we can never fault any of the staff on that unit, they did everything they could to help him and other young people, they're an amazing bunch of people."

Mother and Father, SCH

### Reduced regime

Parents expressed concern at the reduced regime for organised activities outside of their child's room. They commented on how any **activities were limited and not particularly meaningful** for their child:

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“In his room for two weeks. He was allowed to come out, wasn't he, for some exercise a couple of times a day? But it wasn't so great that, it's not something that you get excited about, I wouldn't think.”

Mother, STC

In particular, parents noted how difficult it was with active teenagers not having adequate **exercise** during the initial lockdown period:

“He [previously] had the fortune of going out for the runs, [but] the first few months of lockdowns he wasn't able to do that sort of thing. Then they started allowing him to do that, which was good. But obviously those, that the initial, what, first two months of lockdown or whatever, he wasn't able to you know. He'd been playing football regularly, going to the gym. And he lost all that physical activity that he was doing previously. Eventually they did manage to bring an exercise bike across to the unit he was in. So physically, he lost, lost out on the physical exercise he lost out on as well.”

Father, SCH

## Education

There was concern expressed by parents of children across the secure estate at the **limitations to education**. In particular, parents noted the inappropriate level of work set, not tailored to the needs of the child:

“Very little [access to educational work] by all accounts. I think there was an initial point where they were sending a bit of work across from the college. I don't think there was anything really educationally that was going on during the lockdown period.”

Father, SCH

“And on the education front, I think, you know, I mean, frankly, it sounds ridiculous the things they are getting him to do. So, you know, he's – word searches and things which, you know - he's dyslexic so it's stupid thing to ask a dyslexic kid to do. But, you know, he's not stupid.”

Mother, YOI

There was a mixed picture presented by parents about the **guidance** and motivating support for children while working on education in their rooms. For some parents, the absence of support meant that children found it difficult, but other parents praised the encouragement that staff had given:

“They haven't got a teacher guiding them if they're doing it in their room, so it must have been a bit hard on them as well.”

Mother, STC

“If he's just given it on a sheet paper, he won't do it. (...) He's not one to sit there and do the work himself, because I think he actually struggles. You know, he's been out of education for so long. So he's not just going to do off his own back.”

Mother, STC

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“I think [key worker] used to stand at a distance sometimes and, you know, encourage him [to complete education work]. So I think that used to happen.”

Mother, STC

There was also a theme from parents about how the less structured and formal education has allowed their children to **focus on studies more relevant** to their interests and intended future:

“But he sounded quite positive because he said education is quite inadequate there, so he was glad that he can concentrate fully on his, you know, educating himself on his favourite subject.”

Mother, YOI

“So I think she left a little bit more free rein in that respect that she's writing a novel and she likes to paint, she likes to play the violin. So they may have given her a violin and she's learning to play that. So she has a lot of things that she can do (...) most of it seems in writing and drawing that's what she enjoys doing.”

Mother, SCH

## Senior leaders' reflections

### Rethinking regimes

There was a sense from senior leaders that lockdown had **allowed sites to rethink** what their regime should look like. The suspension of some activities, and lower numbers of children being sent into custody, had allowed more reflection about the quality and effectiveness of what was delivered, and provided some insights into what might work better:

“It's almost as if the pause button has been hit in a place like [YOI] – things have slowed down considerably, which has allowed the leadership and the staff to think about what they're doing, plan for what they're doing and deliver it rather than this kind wheel that is a place like [YOI] is on.(...) COVID has slowed things down (...) It's allowed establishments and leaders and teams to almost kind of regroup and think about what they're doing and be quite planned and deliberate about it rather than just keeping the regime going.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

There was some frustration in hindsight from some quarters that the lockdown period was not used even more explore imaginative ways of running regimes:

“I do think that having kids, having kids as a very captive audience was an opportunity to embrace Conflict Resolution in a much bigger way than we did. So I know we did CoSP.[personal officer scheme] (...) Conflict Resolution is a responsive or reactive thing to do. I think it needs to be a proactive thing to do. (...) So yes, imagine that there's a real conflict between this child and this child that isn't really there. (...) And I really don't want to sound like I'm being bit of a Debbie Downer on this or I'm blaming anybody, but when I look back on it, why were we locking kids behind a door. What was stopping us being in a position where we could have some of those doors open some of the time? That's not to say a free for all, but I think we could have been more ambitious.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

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## Time spent in rooms

Senior leaders in YCS felt that children in YOIs spent more time in their rooms during the summer of 2020 than they would have liked, even considering the pandemic situation. It was felt that the main reasons were the delayed re-establishing of organised regime activities, like education.

Senior leaders were very clear that children had been more engaged in activities and interactions when out of their rooms compared to before the pandemic. The consensus, as with boys and staff, was that this was helped by being in **smaller 'family' groups**:

"Given the different benefits felt by What we have learned is that it's probably better to engage children in meaningful activity in smaller groups than we were. I think that has definitely come through. (...) I think we're getting children more engaged in their activity, and I think that will likely lead to better achievement."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

Senior leaders voiced the wish to find a way to continue with smaller groups beyond the time when public health restrictions required such 'bubbles'. However, they were very aware that when organising children into smaller groups, the amount of time that each can spend out of their rooms is limited by both the space (so they do not mix) and staffing (so they are each individually supervised):

"I am a believer, and all the staff know, smaller groups do work. They are working better (than wing groups), so I really hope we don't lose that (...) It is clear that if the lads don't have to come out with twenty-six other lads on the unit, there are less incidents, less bravado, there's a real opportunity for them to actually be children a bit more, and to get much more quality input and engagement. And the Rubik's Cube of that is that you have to do that in small groups, but if you want more time of room, how do you crunch everything together? And that's our issue. (...) There's no way for us to do that in the YOIs because we don't have enough staff ratio, don't have enough space."

Senior Leader, YOI

There was a strong narrative among senior leaders both in headquarters and YOIs that the pandemic had shown that the quality or **meaningfulness of the time that children spent out of rooms** was more important than had been previously realised. The developing argument, perhaps in response to the above conundrum, was lockdown had shown that it was more valuable for children to have active and interactive time out of rooms than (more) unstructured or poorer quality time

"And I think I'd like, I'd like us to get a measure of what quality time looks like, rather than what does time out of room data suggest."

Senior Leader, YOI

"I don't think really [measuring time out of room] tells them about a child's experience. When your time out of room might be this, but if a child is sat at a table for three hours while he's out of his room, it's not really useful the child's experience. Could be, "Just as bored now as I was in my room."

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Senior Leader, YOI

“I think we got to a place where when the boys are out of that room, it's much more purposeful, much more meaningful.”

Senior Leader, STC

“So, making sure that children are getting really good quality education rather than them going into a classroom doing crossword puzzles is really important. How do we make sure that the time that children do have out of room is quality time?”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

Senior leaders reflected on the difficulties they had faced in trying to operate a healthy regime for children when faced with **staff shielding or isolating**, looking to different solutions:

“We had I think at one point where something like just under 40 staff who was shielding in the earlier parts of the pandemic. Yeah. And that was really, really difficult to function. So we managed to transfer some staff from the youth offending team (...) The staff that we had here had to not only just [look after] the kids, but to engage and enable the new staff to feel comfortable.”

Senior Leader, SCH

## Leisure activities

There was a view among senior leaders that more could have been done to ensure children had more physical activities, including use of a gym, earlier in lockdown:

“What's the difference between a group of four or five children on a playing field doing an activity together within their bubble against being in a cardiovascular suite? (...) It's the same bubble. Why don't we take action after they've been in there, in order to disinfect or whatever, we do that everywhere else. I think this is probably the one area where activity could have done better. (...) I'd have pushed for access to the gym prior to access to education because it was something that children enjoyed doing and where they could let off steam.”

Senior Leader, YOI

## Education

There was a strong theme from Senior leaders across YCS headquarters and YOIs of being **frustrated** that children's classroom education had not been re-established before Autumn 2020, by which time children in the community were back at school. They were clear that industrial relations was their main barrier, with HMPPS's wider considerations for the adult estate meaning that the **children's needs were not met**:

“I found the whole idea of stopping education deeply frustrating. (...) I got it in the first couple of months because that's what was happening in the community. But the minute that we knew we could do it safely, I really wish we could grasp the nettle and just made it happen. (...) You know, schools did continue for vulnerable kids. Well, these are all vulnerable. I just I didn't get it. To be fair to my education provider, after about six weeks or so I think they wanted to crack on as well.”

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Senior Leader, YOI

“There was one of the prisons who, twelve weeks in, was saying, “We’re ready to go, we’re ready to start opening this stuff up, we’ve got enough staff”. And so the governor started to have those conversations locally. We hadn’t had the conversation nationally. (...) That prompted within probably 24 hours of her having that conversation (...) the POA tweeting about rogue governors and HMPPS putting their lives and the lives of their members at risk (...) playing Russian roulette with the lives of everybody in the establishment, and they would be escalating the matter to the Secretary of State. A governor starting to think about opening up and planning, provoked that really immediate kind of emotive reactionary response.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“We had established a position where we were able to open up education probably eight weeks into this. It became really difficult because we’d established a very rigid adult male position on this, and we’d agreed it corporately with Ministers and we’d agreed it corporately with the POA. And it became a really difficult thing to do moving the machine into place (...) There was a genuine anxiety about, “If we start doing this over here, we’ll destabilise the relationship with the POA which means we won’t be able to do other things” (...) The needs of the children were put beneath the needs of the wider organisation and the adults.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“One of the many things that stops [us doing more] is where we fit into the bigger machinery of HMPPS, but also where what we want contravenes what the POA want. An example might be, I think we could have done face to face education more quickly, our children are vulnerable children should have been to continue to have education from day one.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

SCH senior leaders noted how both education staff and others were **flexible and adapted provision** in order to ensure that children’s needs were met as much as possible:

“My education team have been brilliant and so we have not stopped delivering education the whole way through this. We’ve had to be really creative. We’ve had to sometimes do one to one lessons so we’re providing education when young people are isolating. (...) And I had education staff coming to help at seven thirty, in the same way I had care staff helping in education lessons because they needed some extra support.”

Senior Leader, SCH

“As the pandemic grew, we sort of created some of quite creative ways of engaging kids in education that didn’t require formal teaching and learning environment, so virtual teaching, teaching on the units because all the kids were in there. So that that’s worked quite well to now, actually, when we look at all of the progress of kids in terms of teaching and learning has continued to rise.”

Senior Leader, SCH



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In contrast, it was noted by senior leaders in YCS headquarters that residential staff may not have been primed, enabled or not recognised that, in the absence of classroom education, their childcare role should require a more proactive role in supporting children's out-of-classroom education:

"Our staff would be coming in thinking that their job is to make sure they're safe, make sure that the children have access to as much regime as possible, make sure that they're getting food. I'm absolutely sure we didn't say to them, we want you to look after them as well. Now some of them will have been very happy to chat to them about the worries that they may have had about parents, but they probably wouldn't have though, "Do they want me to go through their spelling with them?". (...) It would be great, wouldn't it, if we were able to get to a place where that was part of the expectation of our staff when we recruit and when we train them."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

## Gold command

There was a strong theme from leaders, including YCS headquarters, that the Gold Command structure was focused mainly on the needs and structure of the adult male estate, rather than that of children – particularly in the initial lockdown period. The quotations below imply a broader issue for the children's secure estate to be 'heard' within the prison service:

"It felt centralised under the adult male estate, and I would say the public male estate. From a YCS perspective, it felt like we were running to catch up and having to shout very loudly to get our voices heard. (...) I think, you know, adult men are the DNA of this organisation and that's where everyone defaults to, and if you don't fit in that mould, you have to kind of shout to make your voice heard in this, so very heavily centralised particularly in the first few weeks. And then, I think, it has become less centralised as governors have designed their emergency plans."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

"Whenever central instructions were going round to governors around the kind of regime or whatever, it was very much adult male focused. If we were lucky, we were able to have the conversation before that went out to say, "Can we insert a line here about YCS and children" or "Can we say there will be a separate policy coming out or separate guidance coming out about children", if we were lucky. Often, we would find out after it had been published and say, "Actually we need to send out the revised, like a version 2 that puts the insert, a YCS comment about it". So that was really, really frustrating at the beginning and we spent a lot of time talking to Gold command infrastructure about what we needed. And every time we spoke to someone, they were terribly apologetic and they were terribly nice about it and terribly like, "Of course, of course". So it wasn't a barrier, but it just wasn't what people's minds were on, and still to an extent isn't. And we have to, you know, have to constantly say, "Don't forget about us"."

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

"I do think that we've had a real battle and it's been a battle that some people have really championed to get heard that children are different. I think that we still struggle to articulate why our children are different, and I think we might struggle with that for a while."

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Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“I'm not against HMPPS, I just think we need a child focus within it, you know?”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

## Exceptional Delivery Model (EDM) process

Senior staff were clear that the EDM process, through which site leaders submitted their plans to open up the regime and ease restrictions after the initial lockdown period, was time-consuming and bureaucratic:

“I think with EDMs we make things so bloody bureaucratic. So, so I'm not I'm not going to lie. I think... I think the amount of work that we were asked to do in the space of time that we're asked to do it was huge.”

Senior Leader, YOI

Again, another concern from senior leaders in sites about the EDM process is that it was designed around the adult estate rather than the youth secure estate, making it harder or less appropriate:

“The EDM process was terrible for us. We did the EDM process, but it doesn't work because it wasn't specific around young people. (...) I think that very early on, they should have recognised that we were a standalone estate and even within that, that could have been broken off further between the STCs, SCHs and the YOIs.”

Senior Leader, STC

## External stakeholders' reflections

### Time spent in rooms

There was a clear theme of concern from external stakeholders that children, particularly in YOIs and STCs, that the restricted time for children being out of their rooms initiated in the lockdown period had **taken too long to be improved**. There was a recognition that this was difficult to achieve while classroom education provision was suspended:

“Once education providers withdrew and the YCS was told that it wasn't able, despite having well-developed plans, to restart face to face education, it was between a rock and a hard place because the difficulties of getting [all] children out in small groups [for long enough] (...) That was probably the outside envelope of what they could do without using the staffing resources that they had in the education providers. And the root of that problem wasn't within the YCS; the YCS was able and prepared to run education far earlier than they did. The reason it didn't run education, it was caught up with a national dispute about activities between the staff association and the national prison service. And, you know, ultimately, that was why in, in April, [YOI] was only allowing children out of their cells for 40 minutes on a good day compared to Parc, which at the same point in time was allowing children out of their cells for over three hours on a good day.”

Governance body

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A second more subsidiary theme for stakeholders, reflecting a narrative among senior leaders, was that improving **quality of time out of rooms was more important than quantity** (and its measurement), implying that it was better to have children out for relatively less time if that time was spent constructively.

“There seems to be an obsession, just because they’re classed as children, that we’ve got to unlock them and keep them unlocked for hours and hours every day, even if there’s nothing for them to do. With kids you’ve got to keep them active, you’ve got to stimulate them. You know, they love the gym, they love cookery courses because they can eat the food obviously, they don’t like mundane things.”

Representative organisation

“What we’ve learned off COVID is that smaller unlocked numbers, a purposeful structured activity for prisoners to partake in makes our jails safer. (...) My opinion is when you unlock anyone, especially in the Youth Custody Estate, they must be busy, and it must be something constructive.”

Representative organisation

As heard from senior leaders, there was also the observation of **operational difficulty** in having smaller groups out of their rooms (rather than all children on a wing at once) for longer periods with existing space and staff restrictions:

“[Smaller groups] would be ideal wouldn’t it. There is a question of staffing, there’s a question of space. Really interesting to think about how [YCS] can, do [smaller groups] whilst keeping people out of their cell for long periods of time. There is limited staffing, [no] budget to recruit thousands of additional staff over the current head count...[Longer term], move away from these YOIs and try get people into smaller settings, nearer to their homes anyway and really push the secure school idea, because I think that would bring some more capacity.”

Public sector service provider

## Regime and education delivery

There was widespread frustration among stakeholders that **fuller regimes were not available earlier** in YOIs and STCs, particularly when there were full regimes in SCHs. This contrast was highlighted to stakeholders in relation to education provision (especially as education was also available to vulnerable children in the community):

“The Secure Children’s Homes, they had a basically full timetable. You know, children managed to keep going to education, they were still able to access all of the usual things they would be able to do, and that was something that was noticeably absent from other parts of the estate.”

Governance body

“[In contrast to YOIs], in the SCHs, the children continued to have education, they continued to have enrichment, they continued to go to the gym, (...) in some cases continue to have mobility where it is safe. They continue to have good contact with family.”

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(...) The quality of that has been maintained in SCHs because they've had the resources to do it."

Third sector service provider

"It was understandable just got to be safe and locked out but the subsequent assessment of how we can have a kind of reasonable regime feels like it's been a long time coming. (...) The length of time which now children have been on this restricted regime that has been too long and that should have been solved by now (...) The YCS do run the estate, and we have a situation in which children have four months now not had the care that they should have done, then it's accountable for that."

Governance body

"Provision of education for children and the disparity between what SCHs are delivering and what the wider estate is delivering [is stark]. Some of the figures coming back are 90% plus attendance for all children in [community] school. Well, we know in STC and YOI world, that is far from the case."

Governance body

The dominant view across stakeholder groups was that it had been wrong to **restrict classroom education** provision in YOIs, and that its reinstatement had been unreasonably delayed. This was considered to be driven by the needs of the adult estate rather than the needs of children:

"The national directive to pull out all education, including in children's prisons like that, certainly from our perspective, was something that we thought was really not the right decision. And I'm going to think a lot of people, YCS felt that also, to be fair."

Governance body

"I think the blanket stopping of education was just, was a mistake and a mistake driven by the needs of the adult estate rather than the needs of the children. In the pandemic, the YCS was seeking cover to try to impose its will despite the unions, I'm pretty well assured that that cover wasn't forthcoming from the national organisation because they didn't want to lose goodwill in other parts of the estate, which were suffering much more at that time. (...) That's the reason we didn't get face to face education until July, despite the fact that vulnerable children in the community were getting six hours a day."

Governance body

The opposing view, held exceptionally by a representative organisation and a governance body, was that stopping classroom education and delaying its reinstatement had saved staff lives:

"The trade unions working alongside [HMPPS] has helped to save lives during this period. So, I don't think it's fair to say they didn't have people's well-being at heart, they had the well-being of their staff at heart, some of whom are vulnerable. So, it was a very difficult period and [there was clearly] some hard negotiation with [unions] and in the end, [unions felt] much more comfortable with open up."

Public sector service provider

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There was a view across different external stakeholder groups that it might be more effective for children to have somewhat **less time in classroom education** than is usually required, but with more time on other constructive activities:

“If you were giving children fewer hours [in education] that were really purposeful and really good, then it wouldn’t be a bad thing necessarily [if you saw that] the other time was to be served by something that kept them out of their rooms.”

Governance body

## Education and activities in rooms

Although there was praise from stakeholders about the efforts from sites to provide children with activities in their rooms during lockdown, there was criticism that these were not tailored enough to their individual developmental needs. Consequently, it was suggested that activities for children need to be more constructively aligned to their interests and plans:

“[YOI] have been really good in providing, you know, DVDs, all different things to keep them occupied. So some of the children actually feel like they’re more like our normal teenagers who spend a lot of time in their bedrooms, to be fair.”

Representative organisation

“Education packs under the door for most young people that I’ve spoken to didn’t feel that they were tailored to their particular stage or age or needs. And for young people with learning difficulties, they just weren’t able to do that without support. I think distraction packs, quizzes, things like that, we should not be relying on these. But if they’re going to continue, they need to be better, and fully tailored to young people’s needs, age, requirements, and interests.”

Third sector service provider

## Physical health support

There was a subsidiary concern among stakeholders that the initial lockdown regime in YOIs meant that children were not receiving sufficient exercise for their physical health, either in gyms or outside:

“I think PE was also something that that could have been provided in many sites earlier on in the pandemic. So, making sure that all children had sort of structured exercise not hanging around on the yard, but exercise that was probably going to keep them healthy.”

Governance body

## Gold command

There were clear differences of opinion among stakeholders around whether there were **any benefits** in practice to YCS being part of the HMPPS Gold Command structure during the pandemic:

“In particular through COVID I feel it’s been really helpful. The YCS is part of a bigger whole and it’s meant it can draw down on many more resources that it wouldn’t have been able to if it was on its own (...) YCS really benefited from being able to draw from

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professional [expertise] in terms of managing a crisis, a grip that you get from the wider HMPPS. I think that was beneficial in the longer term.”

Governance body

“I think they would have been able to get PPE as part of the Ministry of Justice (...) I don't think that there was anything that you could say was a huge advantage for the YCS being so linked to HMPPS in this process. (...) What that did was dilute the voice of the YCS in the wider service and it was detrimental to the outcomes for children.”

Public sector service provider

However, there was a theme across stakeholder groups that the structure did not consider sufficiently or allow for the difference between children and adults, **restricting** the YCS's ability to meet children's specific needs:

“I think I hadn't probably been as vocal about how I see HMPPS restricting what YCS can do. And I think that became very obvious during COVID. (...) They might agree senior, high level that children are different, but the infrastructure, the command and control [of] that organisation does not allow for that difference. And I thought that time and time again, and it is interesting to see whether the change this time.”

Third sector service provider

“The fundamental problem about the time in cell and regime is that initial decision to place the YCS in with the national command structure; that was the fundamental mistake that led to everything else. (...) I think that the YCS and the individual establishments have done their best within very tight constraints that were designed for adults (...)

Fundamentally, these children were treated as adults.”

Governance body

## EDM process

The EDM process for planning and seeking approval to ease lockdown restrictions for each site was not featured heavily in stakeholder comments. The only minor theme was that the process took too long, even considering that the youth secure estate was prioritised:

“The EDM process for the bureaucratic team takes a bit too long to get signed off (...) We were on the side lines, saying for goodness sake get on with it. It isn't difficult, but actually it just seemed to take a long time for us to get that through.”

Governance body

## Summary

Although most **children** across the secure estate spent more than two hours a day out of their room on weekdays, this proportion was only a third at weekends – and both proportions were significantly lower during the first months of lockdown than before the pandemic (in YOIs and STCs). Children were less likely to spend time out of rooms if in a Young Offenders Institution (YOI), and with staff (levels) able to be responsive. Although at first, this extended time could offer a break from the institutional culture, it became to be experienced as boredom, frustration, and isolation. Nevertheless, most children considered that they had enough activities in their



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rooms – particularly if they were able to keep in contact with family, were encouraged with positive staffing and productive activities that helped development, and were older.

Most children across the secure estate felt that they had good access to at least some activities outside of their room throughout the pandemic, although this was more likely if not in a YOI, children had positive relations with staff, and were already well-established in custody. Restrictions to gym activities caused particular frustration. At the basic regime level, even at the start of the lockdown, almost all children were able to shower daily and spend time in the fresh air (usually to exercise) – indeed, a significantly greater proportion than before the pandemic. However, this was still experienced as very limited and subject to change (bringing more frustration). Similarly, almost all felt they had enough clothes and enough food – about double the proportion of children than before the pandemic in YOIs and STCs (Secure Training Centres) felt they were getting enough to eat. A substantial minority of children were feeling “really unfit” during the COVID-19 restrictions, predicted by less access to activities and not feeling able to easily get healthcare (although the latter was improved from pre-pandemic levels). Again, lack of access to gym facilities was a focus for children feeling unfit – both for their physical and mental well-being. Most children with specific healthcare problems considered they had received the help needed (again, improved from pre-pandemic levels).

Between the start of the pandemic and the beginning of August, only about half of children across the secure estate had any access to classroom-based education. However, there were actually significantly fewer children with no education provision at all than before the pandemic, perhaps pointing to the need to build back more flexible provision for children not engaging with classroom education. Children noted that out-of-classroom educational provision could be more tailored to their individual needs. Although education provision clearly varied across site type, significant predictors of education provision ran across all children’s experiences – how full the regime was generally, whether there was active case management, and how long a child had been in custody. Only half of children received any encouragement from staff to engage with education (lower in YOIs than before lockdown). Only about a third received help from staff with education outside the classroom, with children feeling that they were left to “figure it out for yourself”. When encouragement and support was noted, it tended to be from education professionals coming onto residential units, clearly highlighting the need for more education encouragement/support from wider staff (as parents would with homework).

The large majority of **staff** considered that regimes were appropriately restricted during the early months of the pandemic, and easing at the right rate. This depended on confidence in public health and satisfactory communication with management, with concerns about moving too quickly focused both infection risk and of losing the opportunity to build back better. Similarly, the large majority of staff considered that their workplace had coped well during the lockdown, depending on perceived levels of management support, their own circumstances and whether they considered that children had always been a primary consideration.

There were mixed perceptions from staff of how restrictions had impacted on children. There were strong narratives around restrictions having been minimised, that quality of time out of rooms was more important than quantity, and that children preferred and benefited from a reduced formal regime (with more informal interactions). Others contended that children were in

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their rooms with little purposeful activities for too long, with restricted access to necessary support and education. It was considered that forced restrictions had highlighted how custodial education could be improved, specifically by smaller groups and a more mixed delivery model. The large majority of staff considered that children's best interests were always a primary consideration during the pandemic. Any concerns focused on whether decisions on restrictions to activities and education were being balanced appropriately with pressures from public health and industrial relations.

The large majority of staff working under a Gold Command Structure considered it needed, although there were mixed feelings about whether it had actually made running sites during the pandemic easier or harder. Concerns focused around whether there was enough flexibility in the service-wide scheme to meet local and children's specific needs.

**Parents and carers** described the frustration and boredom that their children felt being isolated in their rooms during the early months of the pandemic, although they also noted the new and unexpected interests and activities tried while in their rooms (and how staff had facilitated these). Parents were concerned that activities organised outside of the child's room, including exercise, were too limited and not particularly meaningful. Similarly, in relation to education, parents of children across the secure estate expressed concerns about its limitations and appropriateness for their child, although there was a theme that the less formal structure allowed children to focus on studies more relevant to them. There was a mixed picture presented about the education guidance and encouragement given by residential staff for education provision undertaken by children in their rooms.

**Senior leaders** considered that the pandemic had allowed them to rethink what the regime should look like, providing some insights into different approaches, although frustration from some that this opportunity was not used more. They acknowledged that children in YOIs spent too long in their rooms during Summer 2020, citing the delayed re-establishing of organised activities like education. Senior leaders considered that smaller family groups had encouraged children's engagement with activities when out of rooms, but presented the challenge that limited space and staffing held for having both increased time of rooms and smaller groups. Perhaps in response to this challenge, there was a strong narrative from senior leaders in headquarters and YOIs that the pandemic had shown the importance of the meaningfulness of time spent out of rooms (over quantity, if poor-quality association).

There was a view that more could have been done to ensure children had more activities, including use of a gym, earlier in lockdown. Senior leaders were frustrated that children's classroom education in YOIs had not been re-established before Autumn 2020, considering that industrial relations and HMPPS's wider considerations for the adult estate meant that children's needs were not met. While SCH senior leaders noted how their staff were flexible in adapting provision, senior leaders elsewhere were concerned that residential staff in were not primed or enabled to play a more proactive role in supporting out-of-classroom education.

Gold Command structure was seen as focused mainly on the needs and structure of the adult male estate rather than that of children. Similarly, the "bureaucratic" EDM process planning the easing of restrictions was felt to be designed around the adult estate.

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There was clear concern from **external stakeholders** that children, particularly in YOIs and STCs, that children's lockdown restrictions to children's time out of their rooms had taken too long to be improved, with recognition that this was difficult to achieve while classroom education was suspended. There was a subsidiary theme, reflecting senior leaders' narrative, that it was better to have children out for relatively less time if that time was spent constructively, also recognising the logistical problem of having children out of rooms for longer if in smaller groups rather than all at once.

There was widespread frustration from external stakeholders that fuller regimes were not available sooner in YOIs and STCs, including sufficient physical exercise and education. They contrasted the delay to classroom education in YOIs to that offered in SCHs and to vulnerable children in the community, with the delay widely considered to be driven by the needs of the adult estate (with the exceptional opposing view that this had saved staff lives). While there was praise for efforts to provide children with education and other activities in their rooms during lockdown, it was felt that these needed to be more constructively aligned to their interests and plans.

External stakeholders had differences of opinion around whether there were any benefits in practice to the YCS being part of the HMPPS Gold Command structure during the pandemic, but there was a theme across stakeholder groups that the structure restricted its ability to meet children's specific needs.

## 6. Relationships and Culture

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This chapter explores children's and staff experiences of various relationships across the children's secure estate during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It considers children's relationships with other children, with staff, with their family (including experiences of visits, or limits to them, of phone contact, and of video calls), with advocates, and with other external supporters. It also considers staff's relationships with colleagues (including workplace culture), management, partner agencies, and children. Parents' reflections also include their contact with children and staff during this time, including phone and video calls.

### Children's experiences

#### Getting on with other children

More than nine in ten children (92%) across the secure estate (N391) felt that they were **getting on with other children fine**.

Understandably, the strongest predictor for whether children [considered they] were getting on with other children was **whether they felt victimised** by them (bullying, verbal or physical assault) during the pandemic. If not feeling victimised, they were almost eight times as likely to consider they were getting on well with children.

However, almost as important a predictor for getting on with other children was their **relationship with staff**. If they were getting on with staff, children were more than six times as likely to also be getting on with other children. Similar variables with a significant association

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included feeling that staff were treating them as individuals, treating them with respect, and encouraging them to behave well.

The final significant predictor for children getting on with their other children was whether they were “**making a special effort to avoid any trouble**” during the pandemic. Those feeling that they were making a special effort to behave well were almost three times as likely to be getting on with other children.

Differences in child-child relationships compared with before the pandemic were mixed. For those who had been in similar custody prior to the pandemic (N257), about two-thirds (65%) reported **getting on with other children about the same** as before. Although about one in six (18%) were getting on better with other children compared with before the pandemic, a similar proportion (17%) was getting on worse.

Similarly, although two-thirds of those children (68%) felt that people in custody were **treating each other** the same as before the pandemic, more thought that the situation was worse (18%) than thought it better (14%).

Significant predictors for children considering that people in custody were treating each other better were reporting that **staff were responding quicker** than previously and **feeling safer** from harm. For each predictor, children were five times as likely to feel that people were treating each other better.

## Positive relationships with other children in the smaller groups

In discussions, children widely attributed improvements in relationships to the reorganisation of residences into smaller and more intimate ‘family groups’:

“There’s been less fights because normally there’s fights a lot and in our houses. We get along. Feel like we have to because we’re in groups now. There’s, like, less problems because we have to.”

17-year-old, YOI

As noted in the Safety and Behaviour Briefing, children felt that the smaller groups **reduced their need to be (hyper)vigilant** to the dangers from larger numbers, and enabled them to focus on their fellow ‘family’ members:

“Get to chill with certain people, not too many. You know they are good people so don’t have to watch your back.”

17-year-old, YOI

“You know the people you’re with more, so even though sometimes like its stressful you can, you’re still with people that are annoying and that but its better cause you’re more secure groups, you know what I mean. You don’t have to worry about certain people not like the whole.”

17-year-old, YOI

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"I think it is better in the way we mix we people. There are groups rather than many people. I can get on with people in smaller groups so it takes me off edge. Harder in groups especially with my paranoia."

18-year-old, YOI

The groups reduced the chances of the children being around others with whom they have existing problems, leaving more positive relationships:

"Better - not seeing anyone that I've got problems with as I'm in my own bubble, there has been less ACCTs less fights and less staff assaults."

18-year-old, YOI

They might then develop **new or deeper relationships** with members of their smaller group that are more supportive or with closer bonds:

"Felt like a community have worked well together (...) Everyone gets on quite well, few fights and no arguing."

16-year-old, STC

"Everyone's getting along more. It feels like we are just a little family in a sort of way you know because we are there for each other and stuff like that, and everyone's just like caring for each other in a way, you know."

17-year-old, YOI

"I get to know the people I'm with better and build stronger relationships within my group."

17-year-old, YOI

In particular, children were able to spend more time interacting talking with those children<sup>3</sup>:

"You communicate with people more innit, so you're with these people every day, like education, yard, soc and that, you're just speaking to these people every day. Really and truly you've made more friends than what you would have cuz of lockdown."

17-year-old, YOI

"More time to get to know each other coz we are in smaller groups - have longer conversations etc."

17-year-old female, SCH

"Just the support. Easier to speak to someone when there's only a small amount of people out on the unit at a time."

17-year-old, STC

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<sup>3</sup> Analysis reported in the earlier section on children's mental wellbeing showed having someone to talk to was a predictor for how 'fine' children had experienced the lockdown.

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## Negative relationships with other children in the smaller groups

However, as indicated by the quantitative findings, some children felt that relationships had got worse during this period. Children suggested that the intensity of smaller groups could result in positive or negative experiences:

“You can either build a better relationship with others or get annoyed with each other because we are in smaller groups. I have built relationships with them.”

16-year-old, YOI

Children noted that they were not usually able to choose who they were grouped with, which meant that they could be put with and forced to interact with others that they may find harder to bond with):

“When, when you get to mix with everyone it’s like you have a choice on who you chill with, who you be around with. You can make your own friends instead of being forced to make friends in your own groups (...) Like, it’s annoying because I don’t want to be with them. When I’m with lots of people you can sort of block out, you can blank them because there’s other people to talk with.”

14-year-old, SCH

As such, relationships may be considered worse if children were not placed in the same family group as others with whom they had already started to build a supportive bond:

“Not being able to see my mates - my group now is alright but has been shit before this. They won’t move me to a group I want to - they won’t tell me why.”

17-year-old, YOI

Instead, children could feel “stuck with” children that they can’t relate to, or feel isolated if others are getting along:

“The fact that you are only allowed to mix with three other people. Like to mix with more, because I don’t exactly click with everyone I meet. I don’t want to get stuck with people I don’t click with.”

17-year-old, YOI

As such, there was some concern at their lack of choice or agency, and a subsidiary suggestion that they had necessarily created conflict in order to force such agency:

“They put me in a random group with people my family don’t get on with the outside. It could have kicked off. They’ve changed my group, so it’s better. [Originally] they didn’t listen to what I said - it would have made their job easier too.”

16-year-old, YOI

“Can’t settle in the groups I get put in, start fighting, so then have to keep swapping groups. [Staff] need to listen to me and put me with my pals. (...) I’ve started fighting to get into the group I need to be in.”

16-year-old, YOI



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Even if children in the same group did get on with each other, there was a small theme from children about how seeing the same children each day could be boring or frustrating:

“Small groups, same people every day, same things everyday Tired of seeing the same face everyday.”

17-year-old, YOI

“The time in isolation with my bubble has been hard as I have been seeing the same faces. So everyone is on edge and that has meant people are arguing more.”

17-year-old, YOI

“People get a bit het up with each other. It's like a double edged sword; if you're living with each other all the same time you're going to get on each other's nerves. Because we haven't had people moving on and off the unit as much as we usually would.”

17-year-old, STC

## Getting on with staff

More than nine in ten children in custody (92%) felt that they were “getting on with most staff” during the pandemic. The significant predictor for feeling that they were getting on with most staff was whether they also felt that staff had been treating them as an individual. When children felt that staff were treating them as an individual, they were three and a half times as likely to consider that they were getting on with most staff.

For those who had been in similar custody before the pandemic (n257), more than a quarter (27%) were “getting on better with staff” during this period – although a smaller proportion of one in seven (15%) were getting on worse than before. Perceived changes that made a significant difference to whether children were getting on better with staff during the pandemic than before were that staff were being more positive about them, staff were responding quicker to them, that everyone inside was treating each other better, and that staff were helping with resettlement. Children who thought that staff were being more positive about them than before the pandemic were almost three and a half times as likely to feel they were getting on better with staff.

Children discussed how organisation into smaller groups led to more personal interaction between staff and children. This context allowed more time to get to know each other **as individuals** and negotiate their relationships positively, particularly in YOIs:

“I get on with staff better - it's more personal now. We spend more concentrated time with less people now, so you get to speak to them more on a personal level.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Since Corona it has been better with staff as the groups have been smaller, so we have better relationships with staff. But when everyone was out on the landing at once it was hard to do this. Think they should keep it like that to be honest.”

17-year-old, YOI

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“Before, you would see the staff every day, but wouldn't spend much time conversating. Now, you can speak to them on exercise yard, get to know staff better and learn about each other and how to work with each other.”

17-year-old, YOI

However, there was also a subtheme that the staffing situation in the pandemic could **interrupt positive staff-child relationships**, particularly if staff were absent from their normal roles or stressed because of staff shortages:

“I don't just go talking to anyone and everyone about my daughter you know what I mean. So, there was only certain staff members that I would do that to, so they were hardly, they were busy with other things they need to do and when they did get a chance to come and speak to me it wasn't even for that long.”

17-year-old, STC

“I get on worse with staff - everyone is just a bit on edge. Being cooped up too much.”

17-year-old, STC

“Everyone is just angry. You ask the Govs to get toilet roll and they just huff and puff. If they can't handle simple things like getting toilet roll, they shouldn't do this job.”

17-year-old, YOI

Reflecting the quantitative analysis, there was also some reflection from children about how personal pressures during the pandemic led to staff and children trying to **treat each other better**:

“Treat each other equal cause it's both the hard time for one another. And to be honest, we need one another to keep us sane to keep us moving.”

18-year-old, YOI

## Treated with respect by staff

More than nine in ten children across the secure estate (93%) felt that most staff had been treating them with respect. For children in YOIs (n312) and STCs (n54)<sup>4</sup> this proportion was significantly and substantially greater than before the pandemic –up 31 % points in YOIs, up 23 % points in STCs (**Table 6.1**).

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<sup>4</sup> The comparison figures are from the most recent pre-pandemic HMI Prisons surveys in each site (see CoRE Programme Methods section: Annex A). No comparisons existed for SCHs.

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**Table 6.1: Relationships with staff in YOIs and STCs - Proportion of children during the pandemic compared with before**

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % before pandemic
Most staff have been treating me with respect	93	62	91	78
I have been cared for by most staff	76	39	93	56
I am willing to turn to staff for help with problems	84	62	98	86

Base = All in YOIs (n312; 10-20 missing) and STCs (n54; 1-2 missing).

Significant predictors of feeling that staff treated them with respect were **access to a phone** every day, being **treated as an individual**, and **staff help with future plans**. Children who were able to use the phone every day were eight and a half times as likely to find staff treated them with respect.

Being treated with respect by staff, or not, was a strong theme from children, and with the extent of respect defining the relationship somewhat. The quotations below suggest that this can be interpreted as **how much staff treat them in a persona/individual or impersonal/de-individual way**:

“Some staff don’t treat you with respect, they slam your panel and throw stuff on the floor. It’s just little things but it’s annoying.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“I asked them to give me respect. They said, ‘I am talking to you how I want to talk to you’.”  
17-year-old, STC

However, there was certainly a theme from children that staff acting in a **disrespectful way prevented positive relations**, and was usually tied to the perceived assertion or abuse of authority. There was also a subtheme that this had increased during lockdown as children are relatively more vulnerable:

“Staff just got some attitudes; think they can chat shit. [They’ve] been getting brave, disrespectful to Yps.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“When banging my door they said they’d give me a nicking. Since COVID they’ve been abusing their authority.”  
17-year-old, YOI

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Another subtheme from children was that disrespectful, power-abusing, or antagonistic behaviour tended to come from younger staff:

“I don’t think they’re [young staff aged 12-25] still matured, because some of them get a buzz from pissing us off. My flap will be open and they’ll come and shut it then laugh about it or you’ll hear them talking about how they done something to another YP and shame them. I feel like they get a buzz out of it, they’re the younger staff.”

17-year-old, YOI

The importance of **mutual respect** between staff and children in custody was also a strong theme. Children had a sense that both staff responsiveness to them is dependent upon their behaviour...

“Staff respond quickly/straight away to my cell bell. If you treat them with respect, they treat you with respect.”

17-year-old, YOI

... And that the children’s behaviour depended on how respectful/personal staff treated them:

“That woman who’s out there now, and [staff name] who’s on our unit now...see, we’ve got big respect for them. See, they respect us, so obviously we respect them. By going down early, we go to bed early for them.”

16-year-old, STC

“The reason staff get assaulted is because they’re cheeky to the Yps. (...) You wouldn’t see a good officer, [staff name] for example, they wouldn’t hit him because he’s a good person and he don’t speak to you like you’re a piece of poo on the bottom of your shoe and that. But other officers, they speak to you how they want because you’re in prison, “You’re in prison, so I can say what I want, I’m in charge”. But that was before and after COVID, so it’s the same.”

16-year-old, YOI

## Feeling cared for by staff

Four in five children (80%) across the secure estate felt “cared for by most staff” during the pandemic period. The proportion feeling cared for was significantly and substantially higher than before the pandemic in both YOIs and STCs (up 37 % points in each) (**Table 5.1**).

Significant predictors for children feeling cared for by most staff were if they felt it would be easy to access healthcare, again if they felt staff were treating them as individuals, staff help planning for the future, allowed everyday choices, behaviour encouragement, and first time in custody. Children who considered it would be easy to see a nurse were almost eleven times as likely to think that most staff cared for them, and children who felt that staff treated them as individuals were more than ten times as likely.

On the negative side, there was a reflection from children that ‘caring’ for or about them was **not a usual part of a staff’s professional role** in custody – that it was exceptional:

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“A handful of select people [care about me]. Most of them just doing their job. (...) The staff it’s just a job for them – they do this and then go home.”

17-year-old, YOI

On the positive side, there was a strong theme that staff were **caring for them more during the pandemic**. Children felt that some staff were showing empathy and understanding on an **individual basis**, acting more in a parental role than previously:

“Some staff showed a side of them that you wouldn’t see before, like a more caring, more responsible side than before (...) They are more sympathetic and just more caring (...) The majority of them now want to do their best to keep relationships good, and keep everything calm... the majority not all. Because they proved it. Like, in the past few months, I have seen certain members of staff that I didn’t think had so much of a caring side be a lot nicer and more like a family figure to young people innit – motherly and fatherly, something like that.”

17-year-old, YOI

“I thought, coming into prison, no one really cares, and staff were just here for the money you know they didn’t care about the Yps. But I see a lot of different sides to staff and stuff like that and actually felt cared. I felt important, you know, that I was getting looked after like that. During COVID when we was on lockdown for 7 days, they regularly checked up on us, they didn’t just come to our cell and be like “Hi, you alright? Cool, bye”, [but] they literally you know sat there at the door and was asking us, like, you know they were talking to us and having a proper conversation, and stuff like that. And like making sure we are okay and just making sure we’re comfortable and stuff like that.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Treated as an individual by staff

We have seen that feeling that staff “treated them as an individual” was the key factor for experiencing getting on with staff, and a significant predictor of feeling that staff both treated them with respect and cared for them. Four in five children across the secure estate (81%) felt that staff had been treating them as an individual during the pandemic period.

Significant predictors for a child feeling treated as an individual by staff were having **behavioural encouragement**, being **allowed choices** (e.g. about activities) and having **enough activities**. Children who felt that they had relationships with staff that encouraged them to behave well were more than three and a half times as likely to feel treated as an individual. Children were three times as likely to feel treated as an individual when able to make choices about what they do each day.

Children discussed how they sometimes felt that staff would **not see them as individuals**, but clump them all together as offenders, or even **depersonalise** them completely, and act accordingly:

“Most of them brush us with the same brush.”

16-year-old, YOI

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“Sometimes don’t treat as individual when responding to questions they hear all the time.”  
16-year-old, YOI

“... don’t see you as a person – treat you as an animal because you’re always behind your door so they can say what they want.”  
18-year-old, YOI

The importance of **behavioural encouragement** was a sub-theme from children, although this tended to be highlighting how this came less from residential staff than others:

“Education do [let me know when my behaviour’s been good] but not officers.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“Staff and Governors don’t really tell you often when you’ve been being good – you don’t know.”  
17-year-old, YOI

## Able to turn to staff for help

The large majority of children (86%) across the secure estate felt that there have been staff they could turn to for help if they had a problem. The proportion of children feeling that they had staff to turn to for help was significantly higher than before the pandemic in both YOIs (up 22 % points) and STCs (up 12 % points) (**Table 6.1**).

Children were significantly more likely to feel there were staff they could turn to for help if staff gave them **behaviour encouragement** and, perhaps unsurprisingly, also if they felt that most **staff cared for them**. If they had staff who encouraged them to behave well, they were four and a half times as likely to turn to staff for help with a problem. However, children were significantly less likely to feel there were staff they could turn to if they had **physical, mental or learning needs** affecting their day-to-day life.

Children discussed how getting to know staff better during the pandemic situation, and understanding that they cared, meant that they were **more likely to turn to them for help** with problems:

“I just feel more closer to them and stuff like that. Before, if I had a problem, I couldn’t really talk to them, say like “This is happening, this and that”, because I didn’t know what they were like. But since this whole thing has started, yeah its... just everything’s come together (...) You get to basically just get to spend more time with them and actually talk to them.”  
17-year-old, YOI

## Staff responsiveness

Three in five children (59%) considered that staff normally answered their **bell or intercom** within five minutes. The proportion of children experiencing their bell normally answered within five minutes was significantly higher than before the pandemic in both YOIs (up 29 % points) and STCs (14 % points) (**Table 6.2**).



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**Table 6.2: Staff attention and dealing with complaints in YOIs and STCs – Proportion of children during the pandemic compared with before**

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % during pandemic
Emergency call bell or intercom normally answered within 5 minutes	53	24	83	69
Complaints will usually be dealt with fairly	68	32	85	48
Complaints have usually been dealt with within 7 days	65	30	79	33

Base = All in YOIs (n312; 100-130 missing, including 96-126 'Don't Know') and STCs (n54; 6-12 missing, including 5-11 'Don't Know').

For those across the secure estate who had been in similar custody before the pandemic (n257), just over half (56%) thought that staff were “responding to me” at the same speed as previously. However, it was a mixed picture for the remainder – one in four children (25%) thought that staff responded more quickly, and one in five (19%) thought that they responded more slowly than before the pandemic.

The significant predictor for children experiencing their call bell normally answered within five minutes was a more **active regime**. For instance, children were four times as likely to report having their call bell answered if they also had good access to activities outside of their rooms. However, children were significantly less likely to experience their call bell normally being answered within five minutes if they were in a **YOI**, and if they said that they were **victimised by staff** during the pandemic.

Although, in discussion, children were mixed in how likely they actually were to seek the help of staff, there was a general feeling that **staff would be responsive** if they were needed:

“You don’t really talk to them that much, but if you want to talk to them, they’re there for you. If you press the button, have a problem, like you need something, they do tend to get you quickly.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Staff will check in after a difficult phone call to make sure I’m okay. They’d answer my cell bell within one minute and come see me. The staff are great, they all treat me really well.”

16-year-old, STC

Clearly, **children noticed** and noted how well staff responded to their requests for help, which they discussed as being varied by staff member:

“To be honest, I don’t really speak that much to staff if I’m honest. Some staff are just dickheads sometimes. Like let’s say I press my bell to ask them for something or call someone like my caseworker, and I just see them sit back down and talk to other officers.

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That's only certain staff members. I have to keep asking. You have to keep saying something to them."

17-year-old, YOI

Specifically in relation to **call bells**, there was some disagreement or different perceptions about what constituted an emergency or justifying its use during lockdown, in particular focused on accessing toilet paper:

"Get an IEP for pressing the buzzer for a medical emergency – e.g. toilet roll."

17-year-old, YOI

"I press the buzzer can I get some toilet paper please she's like "Uhhh, you only press the buzzer if its emergency", and I'm like "It is an emergency, I need my toilet paper". She's like "Uuuh, it's not an emergency", and I was like 'What do you mean that's not emergency, I need toilet paper!'."

17-year-old, YOI

There was particular concern from children that such disagreements result in **punishments** from staff, either informal (like being ignored in future) or formal, resulting in negative relationships or not asking for help:

"You can't use your call bell. You gotta shout them and sometimes they don't listen or can't hear you. And then they'll punish you for using your call bell, and then it builds up a bad relationship you get me."

17-year-old, YOI

Finding some staff less responsive could be **translated into a lack of caring** about them, or even disparity or discrimination against them. This could relate to answering call bells, access to activities or property, or processing phone pin numbers or post, or video-call applications:

"When I put my bell on, staff violate; they walk past but don't check up on me. Takes staff longer to come to me. That's why I don't feel like they care."

17-year-old, YOI

"Certain staff help, not all. Certain people get treat differently from others. They treat me differently; some people will get stuff before me, some staff talk to me like shit. Sometimes they turn cell bell off and never come to my door, only certain officers will answer it, some will walk past. Some staff told me I wouldn't get my visit if I didn't get off railings, [but] staff will help fill forms for me."

17-year-old, YOI

"Also issues with getting property. Could be not related to skin colour, but I feel like it is a factor."

15-year-old, STC

Reflecting quantitative analysis, there was a mixed picture for whether children felt that staff were responding quicker or slower to their needs during the pandemic. If they thought that staff

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were more responsive, children tended to put this down to more staff, more time, or being treated more as an individual:

“There’s more staff on the wings and the majority of the time we’re in our pads so it’s easier to ask them for things and they do it quickly.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Being treated as an individual – come and see you faster; before they’d take longer.”

18-year-old, YOI

Conversely, for children who thought that staff were responding more slowly, discussions tended to be more about fewer staff or stretched resources, which could lead to their frustration:

“I ask for something and it takes bare long and [stress] builds up init...Because there’s fewer staff, things like that. Before, most of the officers or staff that never used to work on the wings, they used to come down more often. Like everything’s reduced.”

17-year-old, YOI

“I ain’t seen him as much [through COVID], my CuSP worker. Other CuSP Officers are saying to me, “Are you coming to do CuSP?”. I say, “Where’s my CuSP officer?” They said, “Oh, he ain’t done your CuSP in a couple of weeks, we’ve seen on the board, we need to do it”. So other people are doing other people’s jobs.”

16-year-old, YOI

“Frustration is sort of the one that stands out.(...) Everything is slower than it usually would be, so like with the govts, if there’s a low amount of staff on the wing and you ask for something you’ve got to wait longer, and you get frustrated and things like that. (...) I’ll actually get angry if I ask for something and they’re taking long or they’ve forgotten about it.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Complaints

About three-quarters of children (72%) across the secure estate considered that any complaints during the pandemic have usually been dealt with fairly. The proportion considering complaints were dealt with fairly was substantially and significantly higher than before the pandemic in both YOIs (up 36 % points) and STCs (37 % points) ([Table 6.2](#)).

There was a similar picture for whether children felt that any complaints have been dealt with promptly. Across the secure estate, more than two-thirds of children (69%) considered that complaints would have usually been dealt with within seven days. Again, the proportion considering complaints would be dealt with promptly was substantially and significantly higher than before the pandemic in both YOIs (up 35 % points) and STCs (46 % points) ([Table 6.2](#)).

Significant predictors of children for considering that complaints have usually been dealt with fairly by staff were an **active regime** (e.g. access to activities), had a **positive staff relationship** (e.g. felt cared for) and **finding staff supportive** (e.g. behavioural encouragement). Children who felt they had been **victimised by staff** (bullied, verbally abused or physically assaulted) and children from a **minority ethnic background** were significantly

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less likely to feel that complaints had been dealt with fairly. If children were from Black or ethnic minority backgrounds, they were slightly more than twice as likely to feel that complaints had not been dealt with fairly.

Timeliness and fairness were both important in children's evaluation of their experience of complaints, which in turn related to their evaluation of staff caring or not:

"Some of them care, not all of them. Seven days if it's verbally, but when I do a complaint form it takes about two weeks."

16-year-old, STC

There was a strong concern from children that **complaints were not always dealt with professionally** or confidentially, which discouraged them from doing so further:

"[Complaints are] not answered well – they don't take me seriously. The person that deals with complaints was related to the person who I complained about. 'Oh, you know how she is' [and they] asked if I really wanted to put it in. They should just deal with it professionally. They messed up my orders four times in a row, and I just got told it's not really a complaint. And then I got told they'd only record it as verbal when it was written. Unfair."

17-year-old, STC

"I have been assaulted by staff as they gave me [injury] during a restraint. This was looked into by safeguarding and dismissed. Govs talked me out of attending hospital by Blackmailing me, saying I would be stuck on reverse cohort landing."

17-year-old, YOI

As implied above, there was a clear perception from children that complaints may not be dealt with fairly because of their **relative powerlessness** compared with staff, and in particular with staff solidarity:

"There's good staff who have your back, but at the end of the day they are all friends so wouldn't be able to report it to them. They are all wearing keys together."

17-year-old, YOI

"I've made complaints about staff swearing at me and coming into my room and banging on my shower to wake me up, but they all gang up and back each other up so nothing happens."

17-year-old, YOI

"I made a complaint, but I didn't hear back from it, so I don't really make complaints now – there's no point."

17-year-old, YOI

## Concern about their family

Almost half of children in custody (48%) had been "really worried" about their family and friends' health during the pandemic.

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The strongest predictor for a child being really worried about their family and friends' health was **anxiety about their own safety** from COVID-19. Children worried about catching COVID-19 themselves were three times as likely to be really worried about their loved ones outside. They were also twice as likely to be really worried about those outside if they themselves had **existing health needs** affecting their life. In contrast, children were significantly less likely to be really worried for the health of family and friends if they had **previously experienced care** (by the Local Authority), and if the **site was calm enough** for them to relax and sleep.

In discussions, children explained how concerns for their family at this time increased their feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability in custody, and distress at not being able to help them, particularly if their family members who had pre-existing health conditions:

“Stress yeah, like personally I don’t want nothing to happen to them now cos I know I would go mad.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Worried about mum if she’s got coronavirus, I don’t know what will happen; she has arthritis. Aunt has a brain injury; she will be killed if she gets coronavirus.”

16-year-old, SCH

## Visits from family and friends

Two-thirds (67%) of children across the secure estate reported **not** having had any visitors during the pandemic by the time of the survey. As expected, for children in YOIs (n312) and STC (n54)<sup>5</sup>, this proportion was significantly and substantially greater than before the pandemic restrictions – up 44 % points in YOIs, up 56 % points in STCs (**Table 6.3**).

Understandably, two-thirds of children (63%) found that having fewer or no visits during the pandemic was “tough”.

Children explained that the lack of visits could be the most difficult part of their custodial experience during the pandemic for them, increasing feelings of isolation:

“Not seeing your family through the visits – that’s the worst thing about all this. Everyone has got used to being in your cells all day, but not seeing your family you can’t ever get used to that.”

16-year-old, YOI

For some, though, any impact of the lack of visits was tempered by the amount of telephone contact they were able to have with their families:

“I get to speak to speak to them on the phone every day so not so bad without visits.”

17-year-old, YOI

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<sup>5</sup> Comparison figures are from the most recent pre-pandemic HMI Prisons surveys in each site (see CoRE Programme Method section: Annex A). No comparisons existed for SCHs.

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**Table 6.3: Outcomes with significant differences during the initial lockdown, compared to before the pandemic**

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % during pandemic
Not had any visitors	67	23	69	13
Able to use the phone every day if they have credit	96	83	(100)	(96)
Can speak to an advocate if needed	85	64	91	78
Base = All in YOIs (n312); 100-130 missing, including 96-126 'Don't Know') and STCs (n54; 6-12 missing, including 5-11 'Don't Know'). Numbers in parentheses () = not significant difference at p<0.05				

**When visits were allowed**, children found the physical restrictions with their family distressing. Sometimes, this would be so painful that children (and families) preferred not to have visits at all:

“See the first time I went on a visit like I hadn’t see my mum in about 3 months or something, went to give her a hug and a kiss innit and the guards shouted at me [that I] can’t give my mum a hug or a kiss, you know what I’m saying.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“I just, I just wanted to give her a cuddle.”  
17-year-old, STC

“My mum said she would rather not - she would want to hug me but wouldn’t be allowed. That’s basically torture.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“I’m not having visits as I can’t hug my mum.”  
17-year-old, YOI

Similarly, children felt frustration and distress at the barriers to familial interaction and intimacy from wearing masks during visits:

“My family like it more [than phone calls] because they can see my face but I’m still, I’m still waiting to see theirs, do you know what I mean?”  
17-year-old, YOI

A subtheme from children was the increase of this frustration and distress by a perception of unfairness in comparison with staff interactions and behaviour:

“And visits - we should be allowed to at least give them a hug. We shake hands with staff - what’s the difference, it’s the same really?”  
17-year-old, YOI



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“Seeing officers on the unit laughing joking, touching each other and when we have a visit we have to stay away from our mum, brothers...”

16-year-old, STC

## Family contact

Four in five children (81%) were in touch with people from outside every day, and almost all (95%) at least every two to three days.

Almost all children (94%) considered that they were able to keep **in touch with family** “enough”.

Understandably, the strongest predictor for children feeling that they were able to keep in contact with their family “enough” was if were **able to use the phone daily** if they had credit. Children with daily phone access were forty times more likely to feel they were able to keep in touch enough. However, children were also significantly likely to feel that their family contact was “enough” if they were also being able to **focus on their future resettlement** while inside. For example, they were five times more likely to feel contact was enough if they were able to work towards future goals.

For children who had experienced custody before the pandemic (n257), comparing differences in levels of family contact with before the pandemic presented a mixed picture – more than a third (35%) felt that contact was improved, a quarter felt that it was worse (26%) and slightly more than a third (39%) felt that it was the same. The only significant predictor for children’s improved contact with their family related to **personal growth** during this period. Children who felt that they had grown during the pandemic were almost three times more likely to feel that their family contact had improved.

A strong theme from children was how aspects of the pandemic, including their concerns and fewer visits, had actually increased their efforts maintaining contact with families, and that this had in turn improved relationships:

“I was getting like visits maybe twice a week, and things like that, and I wasn’t really ringing them in the days and that. And now I’m ringing them every day, like part of everyday life, do you know what I mean?”

17-year-old, YOI

Converse to children’s concerns about not being able to protect their families at this time, there was a subsidiary theme in relation to increased contact that children felt they needed to call in order to still look out for them:

“[Contact is now] better - I only really rang my mum, but now I ring my Nan and my mum. You have to look after your family members at times like this you get me.”

17-year-old, YOI

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## Phone access

Almost all children (97%) across the secure estate were able to use a **phone** every day if they had credit. For children in YOIs (n312), the proportion able to use a phone every day was significantly higher than before the pandemic - up 13 % points.

The increased access and credit for telephones was a strong theme from children in YOIs, in particular for children whose access to their family is usually prevented because of the inability to meet phone charges. They described the extra credit as helping children to manage their emotions:

“You can call every day, and we've been getting £10 extra free during COVID, its good cos lots of us don't have much money so it's good they help us speak to them.”

16-year-old, YOI

“Having extra credit helps a lot, me and my family. It helps us mentally- keeps us talking to or family more often.”

18-year-old, YOI

However, children felt that the phone charges were still a barrier to their family contact, and even more so when phone credit was reduced:

“Phones cost a fortune, 20 minutes a day, used to have visit every week, feels like mental torture.”

17-year-old, YOI

“The phone credit runs quickly. One pound for ten minutes seems like extortion prices. I haven't spoken to anyone in 3 days as I'm trying to save my credit.”

17-year-old, YOI

“When they had that £20 phone credit then they put it to £10 that was devastating, that, it was horrible.”

17-year-old, YOI

Children also discussed practical and procedural issues limiting phone access. In STCs, they pointed to restrictions to which party could initiate calls, and to the times for calling which might not then be convenient for families. Similarly, there was also frustration expressed from children in YOIs that their phone calls may be limited because the phones were not always working properly, or even because of security precautions. These restrictions on phoning home could add extra stress to the situation:

“Cos in [STC], they could call in, but here you can only call out (...) I don't know what [family] is doing at what point (...) I don't call them every day because I don't wanna keep disrupting them and getting them in trouble at work and things like that. So it's just a lot, it's stressful for everyone really.”

17-year-old, STC

All told, however, there was still the subsidiary reservation from children that phone contact could not replace a child's need for face-to-face intimate contact with their family:

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“Family contact is better because we get free phone credit, but it's worse because there aren't proper visits.”

18-year-old, YOI

## Contact with advocates

The large majority of children across the secure estate (86%) felt able to speak to an **advocate** (for example, Barnardo's) if needed, although fifty children reported that they couldn't.

The proportion of children able to speak to an advocate was significantly higher than before the pandemic in both YOIs (up 21 % points) and STCs (up 13 % points) (**Table 6.3**).

In discussions, children generally showed awareness of how to phone advocates and recognition that they were accessible free at any time. They appreciated when the advocates proactively checked in on them (children in STCs and SCHs):

“He [Barnardo's] rang me, innit, they ring me sometimes, init. Just to check up, see if you're okay and that, see if I've got anything wrong and that.”

16-year-old, STC

Children noted mixed experiences when they sought the help of advocates on the phone during the pandemic. A repeated theme on this topic from children in different establishments was that, although they have access to an advocate, they had not managed to contact them:

“Barnardo's take ages to answer phone - says invalid number. Tried but never got through.”

15-year-old, STC

“I have been trying to ring Barnardo's for a month and nobody has been in contact with me or nothing. Contacting them now would be pointless as it's all been resolved.”

18-year-old, YOI

“Phones cut out at 9.00 but should be turned off at 10. Can't speak to Samaritans.”

16-year-old, YOI

When they were able to engage the advocate, there was an appreciation of the support in the pandemic lockdown:

“I speak to a geezer called [NAME], innit. He's safe, man, safe. He's helpful, man, he does things like...I lost my activities for 3 days, innit, so that was when I was in quarantine so I didn't have anything for 3 days, so that's like 64 hours or something like that. I told my man; next day I got a two-and-a-half-hour activity. So he put in a complaint...he said, 'You can't keep a young person in his room for that long'.”

16-year-old, STC

## Contact with other external supporters

In discussions with children, there was a theme of appreciation for external supporters at this time. In particular, they noted how accessible services including their home YOT and solicitors were on the phone:

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“I speak to my caseworker, YOT worker, over the phone, speak to the guards downstairs, speak to CAMHS, speak to the psychologist... speak to quite a few people, innit.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“Yeah [speak to] my YOT worker, solicitor...easy [to contact], just pick up the phone and dial the number.”  
16-year-old, YOI

As found when discussing interactions with site staff, children highlighted in particular when external agencies had given affirmative behavioural support and future-focused resettlement support:

“Received comments from YOT about how I've been a good lad.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“Been on phone with YOT worker about getting a flat and that when I leave.”  
17-year-old, YOI

However, there was certainly still a theme in discussions that contact over the telephone with professionals might not always be as easy or useful to children as ‘face to face’ contact, and particularly when needing to build trust:

“Over the phone, I’ve had a meeting with my case manager, my social worker, my IRO, my PA and my YOT worker...over the phone instead of like face to face...it was alright, it was a bit weird sometimes...I couldn’t see their faces.”  
16-year-old, STC

“I prefer it in person innit...I’m getting transferred over to probation and I don’t think I’ll have a visit from the probation worker that I’m getting transferred over to. I prefer to meet them, have a quick conversation with them first, get to know them a bit.”  
17-year-old, YOI

## Video calls

Almost four in ten children across the secure estate (38%, n148) took part in video calls. Of those who had calls (N148), the majority (59%) had multiple calls. Significant predictors of children having had video calls included not being in an STC and having a supportive relationship with staff.

Nine in every ten children across the youth secure estate (90%; n349) reported being offered video calls at some point during the pandemic. Significant predictors for experiencing an offer of a video call were being in weekly contact with the outside world, and not feeling victimised by staff (breakdown in relations).

Just over half of children (51%, n179) who were offered the chance of video calls accepted that offer, corresponding to 46% of all children across the estate. There were two significant predictors of accepting the offer of a video call: having confidence in procedural justice and having a supportive relationship with staff.

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There were a number of dominant themes in comments from children who decided not to take up the offer of a video call. One centred on concerns around **lack of privacy** in calls, particularly when they understood that a member of staff would be in the room with them and hearing what they were saying in intimate calls with their family. In a situation where children had given up their family life and normal childhood, this was an interference or mixing of worlds that they weren't prepared to make:

"There's no point in taking it up because of all the fucking rules. There's a gov behind me. I don't want to be in a visit where there is someone sitting behind, listening to everything I say to my mum. It's fucking stupid."

17-year-old, YOI

"I wouldn't like officers around, like being in private. Me and my family joke around. I don't want officers there."

18-year-old, YOI

Echoing the need to keep their family separate, related to a lack of trust in staff, a subsidiary theme was around data protection concerns for their family:

"Don't trust them. All the information goes on a database and I don't trust it."

17-year-old, YOI

"Staff forget to delete details on the tablet and other kids would use it, so I don't want other people seeing my family's details."

17-year-old, SCH

In a theme related to the concern with mixing worlds, other children talked about how **it would be upsetting** emotionally. They decided that it would be easier for them (and their families) if they kept things separate:

"I'd rather speak to them through the phone. If I see my house, it will make me wanna go back."

17-year-old, SCH

"I tell them no to be honest, cos you see my mum, she'd be crying and that and then it's hard cos I'd do something I'd regret. I want my mum to be happy, but it is what it is."

16-year-old, YOI

As a subsidiary concept, it was felt that the coldness of a distant video call would be discomforting, embarrassing, or disorienting:

"A lot of people feel it's not comforting enough – it's awkward."

18-year-old, YOI

A dominant theme among children who did not take up the offer was around how the process would be too complicated or bureaucratic. In the main, this focused on the difficulties or inconvenience for their families or for them:

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“It’s too complicated. Need proof of address.”

16-year-old, YOI

“It takes too long. Quite a waiting queue, so no point.”

18-year-old, YOI

The rules in the process also appeared to mean that some children knew that they would not be able to contact the person they would find most supportive:

“My girlfriend is not able to be on it due to her age, so I don’t want it.”

17-year-old, YOI

Internal processes were not the only barrier that children cited as impossible to overcome. Another dominant theme was that it was not worth taking up the offer of video calls because their family would not be capable of handling the process or technology:

“My mum doesn’t know how to do it cos she’s from the 80s. She doesn’t know how to use her phone. But I would like to see her.”

17-year-old, YOI

A further major theme was that children could see the video calls as unnecessary or not worth the hassle of arranging. This was particularly the case if they were already in contact with their family by phone, if thought they would be getting out, or getting released soon:

“I can just ring someone, so I don’t really need to. It’s only half an hour as well, so I might as well just ring people.”

17-year-old, YOI

In contrast with it being easy to contact their family on the phone, however, there was a subsidiary concept that children did not have anyone close enough to call:

“No family to have calls with.”

17-year-old, YOI

In the end, four out of five children (83%, n148) who accepted the offer of video calls actually had **video calls transpire**. That corresponds to the figure of 38% of all children across the estate, noted at the top of this section. The only independent significant predictor for whether calls went ahead was if the child had not spent any time in the Reverse Cohorting Unit, suggesting a logistical barrier.

Why did children think that calls had not transpired? The most dominant theme in comments about expected video calls failing to take place was a **lack of explanation** – it was just understood by children that the site had failed to arrange them, perhaps due to incompetence. Though without a sense of urgency, children talked about the time elapsed since they agreed to a call. There did not seem a surprise that authorities had not delivered a service promised to them. There was the sense for some that they may never be delivered, or that they would have in-person calls before the video calls were available. There was a dominant theme in the children’s assessments of why video calls did not happen around **bureaucratic or procedural**



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**barriers.** We had seen earlier that children who chose not to accept the offer of a video call had predicted procedural barriers. The barrier most prominent in children's statements was difficulties with family passing the security or ID checks:

"They said they'll make them possible, but they haven't done that yet."

17-year-old, STC

"Mum couldn't manage to pass through the ID check. They said the background on the photo wasn't white enough. Didn't accept it. We're just going to wait 'til normal visits."

16-year-old, YOI

For other children, the barrier was perceived to be around arrangements for booking the calls, with sites not managing to organise a suitable or appropriate time. Again, there were varying degrees of fatalism or frustration expressed in the children promised and then not able to see their loved ones:

"You are never here when it happens. I am given a random day and it is not usually on the weekends, and I am on trial on the weekdays."

16-year-old, YOI

"They're moving dodgy about Skype calls. They say my dad has been verified, but then when he calls, they tell him he can't book. No one will tell me what's going on or how to fix the issue. It's annoying, to be honest. It would be good cos I could see my little sister and dad together on Skype. My sister can't come for actual visits cos she's under 11 and because she doesn't live with me dad – only one bubble allowed. I haven't seen her since last year. It's tough."

17-year-old, STC

There was a suggestion from a child that they were deliberately prevented from contact with their family as a **punishment**, either official or summary:

"Had one. Was gonna have a second one, but had a fight, so cancelled."

17-year-old, YOI

However, for others, the failure of their family to have video calls with them is simply an example of the being let down or the child not being their top priority:

"Because my family haven't signed up to it. I don't know why they haven't. I guess they might not have time."

17-year-old, YOI

How did children find the experience of video calls? The most dominant positive theme among children who had had video calls was, as would be expected, around how **good it was for their wellbeing** to see their family (as well as nice for them to see their family pleased to see them). They told us how it made them smile, and even how its advantage over a phone was that they caught a glimpse of normal childhood again, including their home and pets:

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“It’s better than just a phone call because you get to see your family, house, dogs. In some ways it’s better than a visit – you can see your pets.”

17-year-old, YOI

The point was made by one child that the use of such technology was, in itself, an element of normal childhood usually removed from custody:

“Actually, it’s quite nice that they’ve done something new involving technology, because we miss those things being in here.”

17-year-old, YOI

The flip side of increased wellbeing is the **emotional difficulties** that children noted above in relation to their decision not to accept the offer of video calls. A subsidiary theme confirmed that having a video call, but not able to actually be with their family or interact in the usual way, could be hard for children. The quotation below again highlights the subtheme of children feeling the need to support or protect their family, and here, the frustration from not being able to do so:

“It was shit (...) just not being able to give my mum a hug, do you know what I mean. It’s my nan’s birthday.”

16-year-old, YOI

A theme running through a number of areas of discussion from children related to wanting to make things **easier for their family**, be less of a burden or protect them. It was not lost on them that the video calls may be better for the family –, and in a pandemic, safer – which in turn makes contact more likely.

“I like the video calls. I get to see my mum and she doesn’t have to drive all the way here. I live in London, so it’s easier. Everything is alright with them.”

16-year-old, SCH

Indeed, in the following quotation, it is argued that the convenience should mean that the video calls continue alongside in-person visits. However, the child does also note the theme among children supportive of the calls that they were not long enough, and may be even shorter if there are procedural or technical problems:

“They should be a bit longer, but they’re ok. Half an hour isn’t long enough to talk about everything, so you have to cut it short. Sometimes, it takes ages to get you up there, and if you’re last, it gets cut even shorter. Purple Visits should keep going alongside normal visits, they’re better for people who live further away.”

17-year-old, YOI

The most dominant negative theme in comments from children about their experience of video calls was around **problems with the technology**, and the frustration that this caused them. In particular, children talked about the picture freezing (perhaps because of security features), which made ‘normal’ or satisfying interactions with their families impossible. For some, this meant that they preferred using the phone:

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“It was alright. Breaks up too much though. It has face recognition, and if they scratch their face, it goes off.”

16-year-old, YOI

Another theme when discussing experiences of video calls that mirrored reasons for some not taking up the opportunity in the first place was concerns around **privacy**. Again, children talked about not being able to talk ‘properly’, where ‘properly’ refers to natural intimate conversation. Ironically then, it is possible that the set-up of the video call can increase the abnormality of their situation for children and undermine identity stability:

“It was a bit shit, cos there’s two officers in the room. That means you can’t talk to your people properly.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Govs were sitting there next to me, watching. They are sitting right next to me, and it’s bare awkward. Couldn’t be myself.”

17-year-old, YOI

## Staff experiences

### Staff relationships with colleagues

Almost all staff working in secure estate sites reported positive relationships with their on-site colleagues during the pandemic (97%, n1095). Similarly, almost all on-site staff who dealt with off-site colleagues (95%, n763) considered that their relationships had been positive.

Almost all staff who usually worked in organisational headquarters reported positive relationships with other off-site staff (99%, n125) and, almost all those dealing with colleagues working in secure estate sites found the relationships positive (94%, n77).

In addition, the large majority of staff (88%) felt a sense of loyalty to colleagues in their own workplace.

Four out of five staff (80%) found good communication among colleagues during the pandemic.

There was also a strong theme in staff comments that the pandemic had brought **increased support and understanding** between colleagues. Staff from across all types of sites and HQ discussed how colleagues were looking out for each other at this time, often going above and beyond expectation to support each other:

“One of my colleagues was like literally, “You look so stressed, are you okay?” So I feel like colleagues (...) have been even so friendly during this period and checking in, having a conversation before you actually get into the work and that sort of stuff, so I feel like that’s been helpful.”

Female, YCS HQ

“I think it’s something about how people have gone out of their way to help other people, and really considered other people’s emotional wellbeing. Because when people ask you now, “how are you?”, I think it genuinely means ‘how are you?’.”

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Female, SCH

“Colleagues have really pulled together and supported each other, including swapping items (food etc) when others were struggling to get things in the shops.”

Female, YOI

Where staff did not consider that their colleagues were supportive during this time, they tended to refer to **longer-standing** cultural **issues**, and how the pressures of the custodial work generally meant people prioritised their own needs:

“This is the worst place I have ever worked when it comes to loyalty and interactions; every man for himself in this place. The way the staff talk about each other is disgusting.”

Female, STC

“People have not changed, just as selfish as always with a look after your own mental attitude.”

Female, YOI

“The care of self and other staff members sometimes isn’t where it should be. Because you’re rushing, meeting deadlines, and there’s always different priorities. And actually the emotional wellbeing is very important.”

Female, SCH

For staff who thought that there was less collegiate support during the pandemic, the main reason given was the **reduction in informal** face-to-face interactions:

“There’s less people in the building, so where I’m going before to the support services room and you’d have a range of people, a range of knowledge. If there was ever a problem or an issue, there would be somebody in that room who could give you, help you know. But those kind of conversations don’t happen as frequently now, there’s not the people in the building.”

Female, SCH

“And it can be frustrating at times that I cannot simply approach them in person as I would if on-site. However, this communication risk has been mitigated by facilitating regular calls with certain professionals and making additional effort to keep in contact.”

Female, YOI

“Relationship building has been impacted. Ad-hoc conversations you would normally have when in an office / bumping into someone at work are lessened.”

Female, STC

Reflecting quantitative findings, staff comments highlighted **improvements in communications** between colleagues during the pandemic, and the positive impact this had on relationships and the above support. Within that, the greater use of online communications was featured:

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“I feel that this situation has encouraged staff to communicate with other better on all levels.”

Female, YCS HQ

“(I’ve) had to rely upon and contact colleagues within the establishment more, which in turn has improved our relationships.”

Male, YOI

“Our department has embraced digital technology and if I’m being honest, I think I talk to my colleagues far more now on Teams (face to face) than I ever did!”

Female, YCS HQ

Furthermore, staff noted how the improved communications opportunities afforded by technology had increased their contact with **colleagues in other departments**, which has in turn improved collaborative working:

“I’ve felt more connected to my colleagues across the estate and not just those in my establishment through the use of zoom, and had more meetings with colleagues that I wouldn’t usually have the chance to do so.”

Female, YCS HQ

“I actually feel I can actually reach other for support easier now than I could have before. I can have a zoom call with workers from [YOI] for example all the way across the country; never could have done that before. I haven’t communicated with that person before, but it’s opened up communication with new people, create a new network. I personally found that really helpful as part of my development.”

Female, YOI

## Workplace culture

About a quarter of all staff (27%) considered that the culture of their workplace was better than before the pandemic, while one in six (16%) felt it was worse.

There was a fairly even split in the proportion of staff who felt that morale in the workplace was better (33%), worse (32%) or the same (36%) as before the pandemic.

Significant predictors for finding morale had improved were having a **better sense of job purpose, better management communication** than before, working in their **usual place during initial lockdown**, finding that the experience had **improved their working practice**, and achieving a **better workload balance**. However, **female** staff were less likely to find that morale had improved.

A little more than a third of staff (37%) felt that people treated each other better at work, with one in ten (11%) reporting the opposite.

There was a strong narrative in staff comments around improvement in staff culture during this time, and in particular how teams had bonded, and morale raised. “**Team spirit**” and camaraderie was discussed by staff across all types of institutional sites and headquarters:

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"I feel like the best thing has probably been team spirit from colleagues, and you know the fact that people are so caring and actually the organisation is quite understanding."

Female, YCS HQ

"I would also say the way officers treat each other has improved, and there is an increased feeling of cohesion and support within the landing teams."

Female, YOI

"Within Admin I feel that our team is more unified and more supportive of each other."

Female, SCH

"Staff groups have pulled together and there has been greater camaraderie amongst teams."

Male, YOI

One dominant theme to this narrative of team spirit was around **common negative pressures** during the pandemic; colleagues pulled together because they were all in "the same boat":

"Teamwork by staff [was most impressive] as we have all been in the same boat."

Female, YOI

"Colleagues have understood that although everyone has different circumstances, no one has escaped the pressures of the situation."

Female, YCS HQ

"I think it's sort of brought us, it sounds a bit lame but, we've all been in the same boat working through it all. And so it felt like we pulled together quite well. So that's how it felt. Sort of like joint up a bit more because we've all been there when everyone else is sort of at home."

Female, SCH

Furthermore, the theme of working together during the pandemic stretched beyond immediate colleagues to **different departments** "pulling together", for example to provide education when the classrooms were closed:

"There has been better relationships made with education staff which has made it feel like one whole team."

Female, SCH

"There was a real team effort within my own team and working in partnership with the establishment you know it was working together to provide the best service, let's work together on introducing these control measures, and if someone was to raise an issue let's work together on resolving these issues (...) I mean we had officers come over and say "Such and such has finished this piece of work, have you got the next bit for them?", and I was getting emails from officers on the unit. That was a real team effort, because some of my staff just go to the unit [with education work for children] (...) and when we tap in the officers and say help us deliver these it became more effective."

Male, YOI



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There were clearly mixed experiences and preferences in relation to **online versus face-to-face** interactions and teamworking. Some staff were clear that team working, and camaraderie had suffered from reduced physical interaction, and that this lessened their enjoyment of the job. However, the greater use of technology actually seemed to add team building or any reduction in engagement was cancelled out by other benefits of working from home:

“I think we all miss that camaraderie of actually physically being in the office with one another. Most days, do you know what I mean? (...) I think information sharing has got better, because obviously on the Teams system there's like a screen where it's a team chat. So it's a bit like instant messaging, I suppose, and all of the team can see what's been said previous. (...) It's a really good place to share information and collaborate. So we feel more and more joined up as a team funnily enough not being together, which is strange.”

Female, SCH

“I don't have [weekly face-to-face team meetings] now. We do talk on teams, so teasing that bit out, yes that could add to low morale. But I think the benefits of working at home override that for me.”

Female, STC

More negatively, there were frustrations or **resentment towards team-members who had been isolating or shielding** by staff working through the pandemic. There was a sense that some of these colleagues were not genuine in their needs and so letting the team down:

“I think there's been frustrations at times when certain staff are supposed to be off and isolating for medical reasons (...) Those that are shielding and have posted on social media pictures of themselves out walking/mixing with those from outside their household is disappointing and disrespectful to those that have worked none stop throughout the pandemic (...) I think that people are feeling frustrated and disappointed with how our colleagues have responded to the situation and not willing to pull their weight...”

Female, SCH

“The situation on the whole has been made difficult by some members of staff taking advantage of the situation, shielding, special leave etc. And leaving the shortfalls for the rest of us to pick up (...) Some of these are no doubt genuine, but some are not. (...) People have self-isolated for in my opinion ridiculous reasons. This has been frustrating as they seem to have been left to get away with it on more than one occasion.”

Male, YOI

## Management communications and interactions

Four in five staff were satisfied with their interactions with those in charge during the pandemic (79%).

Almost three-quarters of staff (72%) considered that communications with management had been positive. Indeed, a third of staff (33%) felt that communication with senior managers at work was better than before the pandemic, with a similar proportion (34%) reporting improved communication from their employer's overall organisation.

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Most staff felt that they have been kept well informed about what is going on (74%) and were aware of their organisations plans for recovery (66%).

The strongest significant predictors for feeling well informed were around seniority: having **management responsibilities**, **additional responsibilities** to their role (e.g. staff care team), and being **older**. Other significant predictors were being **male**, and not having suffered COVID-related distress (e.g. family loss).

A clear narrative in comments from staff (both in sites and headquarters) about the relationship with managers during the pandemic stressed how they had been **more available** and accessible during this time. They pointed to how there had been better **communication**, where they had heard from managers on a more regular basis and felt more “connected” to them:

“I think that the management team have been more available, certainly more approachable, and things have definitely changed. It might be at a very basic level, but that is where a meteoric shift starts.”

Female, SCH

“There’s a morning meeting every morning at [YOI] which is headed by the Governor and then all the other senior managers. And there was a lot of information given out at that meeting.”

Male, YOI

“I know there’s a crisis so there’s lots going on, but communication wise I feel that there’s more information about all sorts of stuff coming through. We’re included in the briefing with [Executive Director], with this more senior leadership connectivity in that kind of updating and engaging.”

Female, YCS HQ

Within this theme of improved communication and connectivity from management, there was a subtheme of the **better use of technology**:

“Communication within my department has been better since remote working. e.g. dedicating time to take part in Zoom calls has been useful to provide updates and share experiences.”

Male, YOI

“Ah, it’s been absolutely brilliant. We honestly can’t fault the service manager, set up a WhatsApp to communicate things to staff every day. Every evening we’d get message updates on the staff that were in quarantining, people that tested positive (...) So if you were at home, we’ve got the message. If you were doing work, you’d still have the email.”

Female, SCH

Related the sense from staff of improved communication, there was a theme that managers had been **looking after staff** at this time, and that they and other staff have pulled together during the crises:

“Staff have been genuinely cared for rather than lip service.”

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Female, YOI

“Staff and management have pulled together throughout the pandemic.”

Male, YOI

This extra connectivity combined with a sense of greater responsiveness and caring from managers could lead to staff feeling more **able to raise concerns** and complaints:

“When e-mailed the management immediately took suggestions and concerns on board.”

Female, SCH

“(Compared with before) I have felt able to challenge poor practice when I have noticed it, question practice I have been unsure of and ultimately state my case, I hope positively and succinctly.”

Female, SCH

In contrast, however, some managers themselves discussed the frustration they felt at **not being able to supervise staff face to face**, and their fear that this may have damaged their relationships:

“Due to remote working, it’s been very difficult to maintain working relationships, to input into meetings and I feel that a lot of relationships have been badly damaged.”

Female, YOI

“I have found it difficult to maintain staff relationships and manage some staff due to me not being in the building.”

Female, SCH

Among staff who did not feel satisfied with their interactions with managers, there was a theme of **not feeling listened to** by managers at this time, and resentment if there was no action following the airing of concerns:

“If I had not had amazing colleagues I would have gone off with stress. Management do not listen to staff concerns and the head of the department (who was shielding) completely ignored staff concerns when he was told about low morale, worries and concerns. There is no support from management and as a result several members of staff have left and are leaving.”

Female, YOI

“All concerns above have been aired but nothing has been done, and therefore I feel unlistened to. Made me realise just how little is thought of staff. I am not prepared to do over and above any longer as treatment from managers has been so poor and feel totally underappreciated.”

Male, YOI

Reflecting the quantitative findings, there was a sense from staff that **communication did not always effectively reach more junior staff** on “the shop floor”, or administrative staff:

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“The management have morning meetings but little to no information is cascaded down to the shop floor.”

Male, YOI

“The admin team have not been kept informed as much as Officers and other staff. We usually heard about what was going on second hand.”

Female, YOI

“I have put “disagree” with being kept well informed as again I believe this has all been pretty much focused on operational staff and as always the admin workers from all grades have been forgotten about.”

Female, YOI

## Staff relationships with partner agencies

There was a dominant narrative across staff from all types of secure estate site that relationships with partner agencies had been made more difficult during the pandemic and, to some extent, that this has made their work more difficult. There were a number of themes to this narrative. First, there was a concern with worse **communication and rapport**, largely because professionals were not meeting face-to-face:

“Communication with professionals has reduced.”

Male, STC

“It has also prevented face to face contact with professionals and I feel as though, personally, I create better relationships with external staff when meeting in person.”

Male, STC

In contrast, however, there was a counter-theme that communication and engagement had actually been improved during the pandemic with greater use of technology. This was a perception not just from sites about partner agencies, but also from headquarters staff about their wider stakeholders:

“Interacting with other external professionals has been easier due to virtual and telephone meetings.”

Male, YOI

“I have been able to get more involved with external stakeholders during our weekly/ twice-weekly calls with YJB/YOT colleagues. Would this have happened otherwise? No, I'm unsure it would have.”

Male, YCS HQ

“Communication with outside professionals has improved. I believe this to be a result of the trend in using technologies such as zoom.”

Male, SCH

A second subsidiary theme was that **partner agencies lacked understanding** of the pressures that custodial institutions were under, affecting relationships:

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“Social Workers and Youth Offending team workers have been very demanding constantly asking for contact with young people and have found it difficult to understand why they can't have video calls with the young people.”

Female, YOI

“It has been difficult dealing with the demands with external agencies such as YOT and Children's services with regards to facilitating contact with young people. Whilst most have been very appreciative of how accommodating we are, many of them have come to expect us to enable them to meet their statutory requirements despite the restrictions, and are unaware of how difficult this has been to organise at a practical level. And on occasions this has led to them making complaints to management.”

Female, YOI

There was a theme of **resentment by on-site staff** towards those working for services that were reduced or withdrawn from establishments due to public health restrictions while they continued working. The perception was that partners and YCS support staff had “abandoned” children or staff, that decisions were made that were not in the best interests of children, and that this in turn had damaged relations between partners:

“Other agencies leaving the site and leaving the children in our care feeling alone.”

Male, YOI

“Seeing mental health and substance misuse workers leave at the start of lockdown full unsupportive.”

Male, SCH

“[Concerning was] partners working from home. Advocacy are there to fundamentally protect the rights of the child and this just wasn't considered when they decided they were not key workers and stopped coming into site.”

Female, YCS HQ

“I have had no choice but to attend work. (...) It felt wrong that other departments left the site along with partner agencies (...) What about a duty of care to the boys? I'm proud I attended throughout, but there are some bridges that need to be built before the respect for other agencies will be rebuilt.”

Male, YOI

“Locally this pandemic has strengthened the team. It has built a common bond. It has damaged relationships with those off site.”

Male, YOI

“The communication between operational managers and psychology services has been poor. I feel there is a sense of resentment that Psychology Services have 'walked out' due to working remotely and I think it will be difficult to rebuild some of these relationships and challenge this narrative.”

Female, YOI

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## Staff relationships with children

Among staff working in residential sites before and during the pandemic (n862), almost half (48%) felt that relationships between staff and children were better than usual, with just a small proportion (8%) considering them to be worse.

For those staff working directly with children during the initial lockdown (n617), almost all felt that they had a good relationship with children during the pandemic (98%). Similarly, almost all felt trusted by them (97%) and respected by them (91%). The large majority (84%) felt that children had tended to come to them with their problems because they know they will sort them out.

The only significant predictor of whether staff considered that they had good relationships with children was if they had **enjoyed helping children on their development**. If staff had “enjoyed helping children to work towards goals and targets” during the pandemic, they were 28 times more likely to consider that they had a good relationship with the children.

Reflecting the quantitative findings, perhaps the most dominant narrative of staff experiences of the pandemic was their improved relationships with children:

“Young people’s relationships with staff have grown and developed.”

Male, YOI

“The conversation with the young people that we work with has been better as the relationships build. Better communication between children and staff.”

Female, YOI

There were a number of themes in staff discussions around this improvement. First, staff discussed how relationships were helped by **more time for meaningful interactions** because of slower and more predictable regimes during lockdown. Greater allowed a deeper understanding of each other’s perspective, including staff understanding children’s needs more.

“Interactions with the young people have been a lot easier due to being able to spend more quality and constructive time with the young people. Working relationships with the young people have become a lot better due to the amount of time we have to interact with the young people.”

Male, YOI

“Young people have spent more time on the unit and relationships between staff and young people are much better. The staff and young people have a better understanding of one and other.”

Female, SCH

“We have spent more time with the young people so professional relationships have improved. we understand the young people more.”

Female, STC



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The point was made repeatedly by YOI staff that **less time in education** meant more time for staff to help the child engage and develop more generally, including supporting identity development and positive reinforcement:

“Children need good relationships and support not 30 hours education they need 30 hours of support to find their own identity.”

Male, YOI

“More time to interact in a positive way. More time spent praising and engaging with different activities with children.”

Male, YOI

“Many residential officers have used the time without the pressures of a full regime to get to know the young people and have supported them to develop day to day living skills as well as helping them to maintain family ties.”

Female, YOI

“[Reduced regime] has given staff time to reflect on what works for individual children not always rushing to deliver a regime that suits the whole group.”

Female, YOI

A second strong theme was from staff (particularly in YOIs) was that the small **family groups** that children were organised into residentially had helped allowed more personalised interaction with staff that had helped develop relationships. This smaller set-up had also allowed more children to feel safe enough to engage more generally in the regime, which had allowed also allowed for greater interaction with staff:

“The implementation of smaller family groups is more manageable and allows for a more intense and encouraging working relationship with the young people.”

Female, YOI

“Regime is easier to manage when social groups of young people are much smaller, some young people who may have been too worried to leave their cells previously are now associating and engaging with the regime.”

Male, YOI

“Working with smaller groups of young people has been effective in developing and maintaining good relationships. It has allowed more time to focus on the needs of individual children and respond in a more effective way.”

Male, YOI

“Been able to build a better relationship with the young people, as I’ve had more time to help them with queries and find out more about their backgrounds due to them being in smaller groups.”

Female, YOI

Education staff reported similar improvement in child-staff interactions within the classroom from children being organised into smaller groups:

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“By having the children in small groups has greatly improved their engagement and gives more purposeful interactions with staff. Education delivered to smaller groups is far better as it allows each child to be taught to their own needs and abilities easier than in larger groups.”

Female, YOI

Third, there was a subsidiary theme of relationships being improved because of a **cultural unity** and shared purpose with the children during the pandemic. This presented as a “team spirit” to help public health and everyone’s welfare:

“More focussed sense of unity and togetherness between staff and children and staff and staff.”

Male, YOI

“[Most impressive was] the way in which staff and children have worked together and found new ways to ensure that children are looked after, communicated with, and supported.”

Female, YOI

It was noted how, in particular, the improved relationship and mutual understanding involved staff taking on more of a **parent/carer role**, with welfare benefits for children:

“The Children will trust and respect you and come to you with your problems if it suits them or they feel they can get the required results here.”

Male, STC

“I have been impressed by the time and empathy officers have been able to show young people. When officers support young people as parents normally do, they feel safe and supported. It has prevented un-necessary referrals to CAMHS [mental health] also.”

Female, YOI

For staff who were concerned that they had not been able to build rapport maintain or strong relationships with children, the main barrier was any public health **restriction their face-to-face contact**, at least initially during lockdown. This was particularly noted by healthcare workers:

“I think that COVID-19 has made giving the young people support etc even more difficult than normal, due to the distancing and whilst we can phone the rooms this is not that helpful if there is not already a working relationship between the young people and the member of staff.”

Female, YOI

“The thing I love about my role is building positive relationships with the young people and having to reduce interactions over this period has been really hard although crucial to keep as safe as possible.”

Female, SCH

“I do feel it’s taking longer to build relationships with the young people due to our team restricting contact with them. (...) Due to restricting contact with the young people and

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self-isolation on admission I feel it's taking longer to build relationships with the young people."

Female, SCH

## Reflections on relationships between children

Among colleagues working in residential sites before and during the pandemic (n862), almost half of staff (43%) considered that relationships between children were better than usual, with just as small proportion (12%) considering them to be worse.

The significant predictors for considering that relationships between children had improved were considering that staff-child relationships were better, working in a YOI, and considering staff working practices had improved.

Improved relationships between children during the pandemic was a dominant narrative in staff comments. As suggested by quantitative findings, this was particularly (but not exclusively) in comments from staff in YOIs. The themes within this narrative were similar to those in relation to the experience of improved staff-child relationships. In particular, there was a strong theme highlighting the role of **smaller groups** to improved relationships, noting how there was a break from existing negative culture, with a reduced pressure and need for vigilance between them:

"Due to smaller groups the boys seem to more comfortable with each other (nothing to prove)."

Male, YOI

"I think that due to the family group situation, this has changed the dynamics of the population breaking some negative cycles in some of the young people."

Male, YOI

"I feel that due to working in small family groups this has had a positive effect on the young people's behaviour because they feel less pressured to misbehave or fight with other young people."

Female, YOI

"They even stated to me that they now feel safer in the smaller groups, and they did not feel like they had to act like a 'bad man'."

Male, YOI

"Children are making friends with their 'partner', they are learning better and challenging themselves more. They are managing to be more independent, while being able to ask staff for support where they need it."

Female, SCH

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## Parents' and carers' reflections

### Loss of visits

Parents noted how the loss of visits, and then their restrictions, had **impacted on family relationships** with the child. For example, below, the children in custody had missed out on pre-pandemic family meal during visiting, and on meeting a new family arrival:

"Just before COVID, every weekend we'd take in like a picnic lunch with us, and have that as a family meal or whatever with him. Obviously, we lost that and all of those sorts of things."

Parents, SCH

"My daughter had a baby at the end of January and obviously [child] has not really seen her because of all this [COVID-19] happened. (...) So she doesn't even know her, her little niece yet which is quite upsetting."

Mother, STC

For parents, there was a sense that not being allowed to visit has meant them missing a time in their adolescent development:

"I mean we can have a laugh and a joke. I feel like he's growing up. He's young, he's grown up from a boy into a man. So he's changing as well and we're not seeing it. We're only hearing it."

Father, YOI

There was a subsidiary theme from parents that **restarting in-person visits** after lockdown brought an excitement but also a degree of stress:

"Predictably enough, my visit last Saturday was complete rubbish because if you've waited for months to see somebody, you're both going to be looking forward to it so much you can't possibly be as good as how you hope it's going to be."

Mother, YOI

### Phone contact

**Increased telephone contact** with children during the pandemic was a strong theme from parents, with additional credit enabling daily interaction and somewhat offsetting the emotional loss of in-person visits. In particular, the arrangement of a telephone in rooms meant more flexibility with calls, better suited to the needs of children and family:

"I haven't been able to see him, you know as much. But obviously, I didn't feel that bad when I was speaking to him every single day. (...) So yeah, I don't think [loss of visits] really affect [the relationship] too much really."

Mother, STC

"I would say that he rang us a lot more often than [before the pandemic], obviously because he was in his room and it's all and he needs someone to talk to. So I did lots of phone calls. I mean, it's one day where I had ten. So there was a lot of contact. But, you know, that was fair enough because he was in the situation that he was in."

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Mother, STC

"I think [child] told me they increased the credit for the phone calls during that time...which gave us the opportunity to spend more time contacting each other. So that was that was a very positive thing."

Mother, YOI

"It's okay the fact that he can ring me whenever he wants to, works quite well, because it means that he doesn't have to have to have long conversations that he has to commit to [when] we have to sit there for 20 minutes talking to him straight. He can just say what he needs to say and then I'll go, and he'll ring me another time."

Mother, STC

Parents noted that children were able to chat to someone in their family if they were feeling particularly distressed, **helping them to cope** with the pressures of the pandemic in custody:

"The fact that he can just pick up the phone and talk to me and his dad, and now he's got access to an aunt and his granddad as well, it just means that if he's got any worries, he can just talk to me straight away and that has worked out well for him."

Mother, STC

Parents discussed how this increase in telephone contact **could sometimes be problematic**. For instance, the parents might feel that they cannot practically manage the contact needs and demands of their child, or create some awkwardness:

"Actually, the freedom that he's had over the phone has been really useful, [but] sometimes it's been a pain. (...) I might be in the car driving, you know, picking up one of the other kids or something. And it's not always the right time to talk. And if I don't pick up, he can cause a problem. So I try to pick up I'm saying to him, "I'm not in the best place to talk right now, so I'll give you a call when I get in". But also that will send him off. So he's ever so volatile, it's really hard to get it right sometimes."

Mother, STC

"The conversation on the phone gets hard because you're speaking to him every day and it's not much changes from day to day. Yeah, you know. He does get the hump sometimes when he says like, you know, well, we're not talking, well you run out of things to say. It gets very awkward every day. Two or three times a day sometimes. You know."

Father, YOI

There was a subsidiary perception that familial telephone contact had been deliberately **limited as part of behaviour management**, with some understandable frustration when trying to build or repair relationships:

"The communication was very, very good. But now, because he has been sanctioned or whatever reason, he hasn't had enough credit. He hasn't been able to buy any credit you know."

Mother, STC

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## Video calls

Parents and carers were very positive about the use of video calls (Purple Visits), praising their role in **helping wellbeing**, maintaining family relationships, and connecting with normal homelife:

“They have got video calls now, and that has been such a great help, been fantastic the video calls for them (...) I update him on family news, and all the local news, and everything like that.”

Grandmother, YOI

“We can bring the dog into the conversation, and it just makes it feel a bit less intense... he loves his dog.”

Mother, STC

However, **technical difficulties** (particularly with motion detection software) were a barrier for parents when trying to have a quality conversation with their child. This either cause frustration or deterred the parents from persisting:

“For us, it was like if you turned your head it disconnected; if the dog came in the room, it disconnected. It was just like, “Oh my goodness, this is infuriating”. There was a human in the room anyway with them so, it sort of feels like, well, if you're going to rely on the human in the room overseeing the whole thing and being there as part of the process, then why can't you just trust that that human is going to make the right calls on whether the person they're speaking to is who they're supposed to be speaking to?”

Mother, YOI

“It seems to be very, very complicated. And I try to do a couple of times. Then I kind of my one on my device was stolen, my phone another device was broke, my laptop so I couldn't really do it.”

Mother, YOI

In addition, parents were deterred from using video calls because of **privacy concerns** by either them or their child, particularly with a member of staff close by and listening to what is being said:

“obviously for (child) with officers sitting there next to him in front of him while he's talking to us. It's uncomfortable for him. Yeah. And I think a lot of parents thought the same. And a lot of kids in there thought the same in there as well. I think that's why they stopped it. I'm not sure... He didn't like them because of the offices next to him. Opposite him, while he was doing it. It's just like, he feels like he's being watched.”

Father, YOI

“[Child] reported to me something really, really strange. He said one day when he was walking, (...) there was a room where the officers were sitting, and they were basically commenting on one of the boy's purple visit with his mum or something like that. And he said, “Mum, I don't feel very comfortable with the fact that they mock us and laugh and [repeating] what we're talking about with our parents”. So in the end, we didn't really do that purple visits at all.”



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Mother, YOI

## Senior leaders' reflections

### Relationships between children

There was a very strong theme from senior leaders, both across sites and in the YCS headquarters, that the move to smaller groups had been critical in improved relationships between children during the pandemic:

"I think the main [lesson] for me would be that mixing children and small family sized bubbles has such a significant impact on their levels of anxiety and [ability] to engage that we really do need to hold them to that. And the strength that it's given us in terms of improved relationships with staff as well, we can make sure that we wake up to that."  
Senior Leader, STC

### Children's relationships with staff

Senior leaders noted how staff and children had more time in the slower regime during lockdown, and with smaller groups, to build relationships and trust. They would have more **quality time to get to know each other**, and develop more caring relationships:

"I remember having a conversation with some children and they were talking about how under normal circumstances they might have a five-minute conversation with a member of staff whilst they're rushing from A to B. Because that's how we think they should be, out doing all these things. Whereas [during lockdown] they were having quality half-an-hour, hour, hour-and-a-half with the same staff every single day. It might have been their only hour-and-a-half out of their room, but it was with that same member of staff, or that same group of members of staff, and it was a continuation of a previous conversation the day before, the day before that, the day before that. That relationship building is starting to setup where the children start to trust the staff. The staff were supporting them through this, as well as talking about their own support and how the impact was happening on them, and relaying, you know, what was going on in the community to the children, etc."  
Senior Leader, YOI

Smaller groups also allowed staff to feel safer, take less-sick leave from stress, and focus more on building relationships with children:

"They're in smaller groups. So they're mixing with peers that they feel safe around and know they feel less anxious, [which] is healthier and safer. Staff therefore are less exposed to violence. They feel safer in the workplace. You know, they're off sick less, so they're able to prioritize getting that kind of consistency of relationships with the children here."  
Senior Leader, STC

"It's allowed children to build relationships with each other. It's allowed them to build good quality relationships with the staff who are within their, kind of attached to their family groups. It's allowed them to access bits of the regime as a group and I think it, I think it has led to a sense of safety."

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Senior Leader, YCS HQ

There was also a sense that relationships between children and staff had benefited from a **move away from formal IEP** (rewards scheme) and adjudications during the pandemic, combined with a slower regime, and that these positive relationships would in turn lead to more constructive behaviour management:

“I think staff had to rely on interpersonal skills, more than administrative processes to manage behaviour and in the main that led to more positive relationships.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“If all my officers are doing are unlocking room doors, chasing them off of the units for want of a better word to activity (...) That's not giving them the opportunity to build relationships. And I think most people would argue that the relationship is so important between staff and children, we can build on that, and develop that, and make that better. That's my behaviour management strategy, really.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

Overall, there was the strong theme from senior leaders that lockdown, and particularly small groups, led to staff **interacting with children as children** rather than as detainees, and the recognition that this is the place that they wanted staff to be in. However, there was a concern that not all staff could play that role with the pressures of the job and may be rolling back from that:

“They were kind of playing games together. And there was this sense of children being children, kind of a family environment. Now, more recently, I'm getting the sense that while there is still some of that, some [staff] have almost lost the appetite for it. And it's easy to lose the appetite for that when the kids that you are trying to do that work with all the most traumatised, the most difficult and will be screaming at you to eff off regularly. And by the way, that's the same kid who smacked the hell out of you yesterday. And I wonder, as a staff member, you start to lose the will to live with that. And I think there is something about holding our staff want to be able to engage with those most difficult children as children. So I do worry and there is a little bit of evidence that we're losing our way with that a little bit.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“I think we've got to take the stuff away around smaller is better, smaller groups of boys out is better. I think we've got to take away the actually our staff wants to have really decent, meaningful relationships with the lads, but they can only do that if they've got enough time to do it and that we don't really want to turn them just back to turnkeys. I don't want to do that; as an officer, as a youth justice worker, that's not what they want to do.”

Senior Leader, YO1

## Children's relationships with family and others

There was some learning among senior leaders that they should have found a way to reinstate family **in-person visits** sooner across all types of institutions. There was some subsidiary

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frustration in the perception that vulnerable children were not treated different enough from adults in custody:

“Whether it's a professional visit or our social visit, we've stood those back up. (...) I think we could have put those back up more quickly. I'm not saying we rush it to a dangerous degree. These are vulnerable children. If you are I have children that don't live with us, COVID rules are that we can see each other. So we should be able to do the same thing for children in custody. So I think there's some learning in all of that and, it's all part of the 'why children are different' agenda.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

Senior leaders explained how they had been very concerned that they would not be able to control physical contact between children and families when visiting returned, increasing the risk of virus transmission and outbreak in each institution. In practice, sites developed their own ways to try to limit this danger:

“Parents put masks, apron and gloves and allow them to cuddle when they come in so they can have that hug for as long as they want to. But once they separate and they go and sit down and take off their mask, they can have no more physical contact on that visit. But I think that's really important that children are allowed to hug their mum and dad when they come. So we made that decision.”

Senior Leader, SCH

There was a strong theme of approval for the increased support of children's **phone contact** with families, including developing in-room technology and extra phone credit. The point was made repeatedly that better contact with their families relieved some pressures on staff:

“We have quadrupled [phone credit] because they're not having the family visit. The children are just so much happier. Families are happier. They just sit there chatting much more to their families. They are building that relationship. We just think, why didn't we do that years ago? Why didn't someone think, “Oh I know, let's give them some more phone credit”. So we will never take that off them now - why would we? It works for them; it works for us.”

Senior Leader, SCH

Senior leaders in SCHs suggested that children preferred frequent telephone and **video calls** to in-person visits, possibly because of ease and because they could see more members of the family, and arguing that they had more contact now with families than previously. The first quotation below noted how, following its success during the pandemic, video calling would now be more integrated into everyday practice, to run alongside in-person visits:

“Now, [Video calling is] just like second nature to us you know. Children would say, “Can I book a Team meeting with mum?” “Yeah”. And parents will be like, “Can I speak to my child? “Yeah course you can”. (...) We won't get rid of those just because COVID goes away. It will be an addition to the core offer to what we do as well as face-to-face visits.”

Senior Leader, SCH

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“I would never have thought that kids would not want to see their parents, but throughout the whole pandemic, if we've I think we've had no more than five visits. That's weird innit, but they're on the phone to them every day. In terms of zoom, they probably see them a lot more now. Contact is more than it ever has been.”

Senior Leader, SCH

Other senior leaders argued that the greater use of phones and video-calling demonstrated how technology could be developed in the children's secure estate for broader use:

“I think that if one thing that came out of this pandemic, it would be let's get the technology right. You can imagine this in the future can't you, a young person is in his room, it's 8 o'clock at night and somebody clicks on a button because they've got authorisation and they go, “Hello Jimmy, are you there?” And you talk face to face. And if that begins a two-hour phone call with his YOT worker or his mum to help him keep, keep safe, then great. Yeah, there has to be security on all of that because you can't, you can't have him running his drug dealing from his prison cell. But I think that we've got more to do on that that keeps that young person connected.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

## Relationships between staff

As in discussions with staff, senior leaders presented a strong theme around **camaraderie between staff members** during the pandemic, both those in sites and in headquarters (usually), leading to a more inclusive and compassionate workforce. This camaraderie also extended to senior leadership teams:

“I think that we love a crisis and it brings out, it boosts morale in the operational line. It brings a sense of togetherness that we don't get, and kind of determination and focus. And it's really powerful when that happens. It's just it runs on adrenaline.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“We've had wonderful WhatsApp conversations, often quite bonkers. Off the record stuff about just chats, getting to know my team really well. It makes me laugh in a nice way. You realise we've all got our flaws and faults and they probably know yours as well, which probably makes you chuckle. You're not always just presenting as a manager. Some lovely chats with the SLT, there's been a lot of good camaraderie and jokes among people, seeing people's pets on screen, you know, they're all the personal things, but then also just hearing real stories from sites and governors.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

However, there was also a concern that this staff team spirit was under threat as the length of the pandemic knocked people's resilience, perhaps particularly where they were communicating remotely:

“I've seen this particularly over recent months. I can see people squabbling and falling out in a way that they wouldn't if they were seeing each other and could just have a quick chat. I can see it in the tone of people's email.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

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## Relationships with service providers

There was a theme from senior leaders across YCS headquarters and sites of being **disappointed** that it was not possible to arrange for contractors providing services in sites, such as advocacy and education, to have more involvement with children during the pandemic:

“The advocacy service (...) are not prepared to put themselves at risk but all the frontline staff here are doing that day in, day out. What message does that send?”

Senior Leader, STC

“I think we've been disappointed by how some of the contractors have acted in some ways, particularly education and advocacy. I think we would have expected more of them. I think they stuck to what they had to do, rather than what they should have done.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“I was quite angry about [advocates withdrawing] because in business as usual, these are people standing up and saying, “We're looking after kids working for their welfare, we're really important and we're making sure that these evil custodians aren't doing really bad things with all these children”. And as soon as it gets difficult, guess who's left looking out for the children, who's committed to looking after the children? That'll be us, we're the only ones - alongside our health partners, they've been sturdy. Everybody else has left the room. For me, they feel like a bunch of hypocrites; it's so important to be there for the children, unless it's too difficult.”

Senior Leader, STC

“Of course because of the pandemic, [the advocacy service] went home, worked remotely because anybody who wasn't essential, was out of site so we could try and keep the remaining people safe. And I get that. But I do think that independent rights and advocacy is so important to us, it is such an important way of getting the child's voice that, with hindsight, I wish we'd been in a position where we were saying we're not stopping that because this is crucial to the safety and well-being. And if we cannot physically have you face to face, literally in the same room together, could we have had positioning where we had [more phone contact]. So every single child could have a call from an advocate every day, how you doing? Anything you want to tell me? Anything that you want to catch up on? Because to me, that would have been useful for our advocates to have been able to do that much more routinely.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

## External stakeholders' reflections

### Loss of visits

Although supportive of YCS's initial approach to public health overall, there was a view among stakeholders that hindsight may judge the loss of all family and professional visits in YOIs to have been unnecessarily restrictive (the stakeholder below notes a different approach moving towards the second wave of the pandemic):

“All children's visits are being considered so important that they're carrying on, which is a different decision to what was made last time with a similar set of circumstances in the

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community. And I think that suggests that the YCS believe that their current position on this is the right one and perhaps, although I'm not sure that they would say it in these terms, that the previous position on this was a bit too restrictive."

Governance body

## Phone calls

There was a theme of support among stakeholders for the **increased ability** of children to have telephone contact with their families, whether through increased phone credit or increased use of phones in their rooms:

"Fundamentally, I haven't found a child that wasn't able to make a call. (...) That was positive, and children appreciated that."

Governance body

However, this success did lead to one stakeholder questioning why, given the benefits of good family relationships to children's wellbeing and successful resettlement, phone credit is limited at all:

"I think the big (...) good thing was the increase in credit so that people could phone out more. But then it really got me thinking, (...) why do we make children pay to speak to loved ones from prison? Why can't they just have some number that they can just phone? It's undisputed that we want children to feel loved and maintain relationships with the outside world. And yes, SCHs kids can keep up more regular contact. There are restrictions and some of them on some of the times when they can call on things, but there's no financial restriction on it. So, I think we could learn from that. We could expand on that."

Third sector service provider

## Video calls

Stakeholders were very positive about the development of video calls in establishments. However, there were mixed views about the **speed of introduction** of the Purple Visits scheme to YOIs and STCs. For some, the speed of introduction at this time was impressive; for others, the delay compared with early or existing use in SCHs was an example of the lack of dexterity in meeting children's needs when part of a largely adult prison estate:

"I think the purple visit is an option. And, you know, I was impressed at how quickly that came online. I think it is not great in terms of the technology, still needs refined refining. And I think you know it's not a hug. I do think that having that on top of the tightened visits, that should stay and be developed."

Third sector service provider

"I appreciate that the Youth estate was prioritised for family contact with Purple Visits. But again, this was in June, July, when Parc [in the private sector] had been running with Skype, and an officer there to turn it off if anything inappropriate happened, from the 21st of April. And again, I think it's part of being the focus of the command structure that the YCS was brought into wasn't on the 600 children, it was on the 80000 men."

Governance body



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“Video visits that were introduced, I think they were broadly I would say they were a good thing. But I think it took such a long time. I do recognise it's difficult to do these things over such large systems. But, you know, it took months and months for children to be able to.”

Governance body

## Child-staff relationships

There was a strong and consistent theme across stakeholders that there had been **improvement** in relationships between children and staff, particularly in YOIs, and that had largely been the result of restructuring into **smaller ‘family’ groups** that allowed for more individual interactions:

“If those activities are taken in much smaller, more manageable groups, then actually I think they are seeing the children as individuals rather than a sort of amorphous blob of children who keep on hitting each other whenever you unlock the door. That is one of the things that there is a real potential to move forward on and to try and design a model of operation within these sites where you can continue with relatively small numbers of children out with relatively small numbers of staff to enable more human interaction. (...) The small groups, the small numbers of officers feels a bit more humanising. So the officers aren't all officers, and the kids aren't all kids, in each other's eyes. So there has been a bit more acceptance on both sides, “I think of these people as individuals”, which I think is a good starting point to then build relationships.”

Governance body

## YCS-HMPPS relationship

Reflecting concerns about the sufficient attention paid to the needs and interests of children in the restrictions to education and Gold Command structure, there was a theme among stakeholders that the positioning of YCS within the HMPPS restricted recognition of, and support for, the **specific needs of children**. The argument was made that the pandemic period highlighted the difference in flexibility between the YOIs under the management of the YCS and other parts of the youth secure estate:

“I think there have been increased concerns about the YCS within the broader context of HMPPS and kind of vying for attention, funding all of that kind of stuff. I think being heard within that larger machinery is sometimes something that we worry about. So I think that, you know, there's not enough determination always between the two systems is my feeling. (...) It certainly felt to us like we were seeing that you were able to do those things [in SCHs], just some of that opportunity for innovation and the flexibility to be able to really try and have the best for children. “Look, why can't you just skip that red tape and do it this way?” (...) That was one thing that I thought was very noticeable in that period, was just seeing the difference of how there was additional flex.”

Governance body

## Summary

The large majority of **children** across the secure estate had positive relationships with their peers while in custody during COVID-19. However, in contrast to child-staff relationships, there was a mixed picture as to whether peer relationships were improved compared with before the

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pandemic – most stayed the same, with equal numbers improving and getting worse. Whether children reflected positively on relationships with peers depended on how safe they felt, the quality/responsiveness of relationships with staff, and whether they themselves were trying to behave well. The picture was fairly consistent across site type, personal characteristics, and level of regime.

Most children found the restrictions to visits from family during the pandemic difficult emotionally. This should be seen in the context of many children being particularly worried about their families at this time. Even when visits restarted across the estate, children found the public health restrictions to these visits hard to deal with – particularly not being allowed physical contact with parents. However, almost all children felt that they were able to keep in touch with their family “enough” during lockdown, with most in contact every day. Finding it “enough” depended on good phone access, but also if they were otherwise enabled to have a positive focus on future resettlement. Some children increased their contact during this time, which they felt improved their family relationships. Phone access was significantly higher than before the pandemic in YOIs, and increased contact allowed through additional phone credit helped children to manage their emotions. Conversely, any reductions in credit and technical/procedural limitations to phone access hampered family support and added stress to the difficult situation. A significant minority of children took part in video calls, with predictor variables around already being in contact with the outside world, logistical reasons, and supportive relationships with staff.

The large majority of children felt able to speak to an advocate (significantly more than before the pandemic). They appreciated the access and proactive support from advocates, although there were mixed experiences of actually managing to make contact. While appreciating phone access and contact with other external professionals (particularly positive support around behaviour and resettlement), children did note the limitations on building relationship trust.

The large majority of children across the secure estate had positive relationships with staff during the pandemic. Indeed, child-staff relationships had improved substantially compared with before the pandemic (measured in several ways). Staff were felt to be more encouraging, responsive, caring, respectful, and supportive for the future. A few factors were consistently important in whether children saw their relationships with staff positively: feeling treated as an individual; positive behaviour encouragement; and whether staff helped them prepare for the future. In turn, the key predictors for a child feeling they were being treated as an individual were (again) behaviour encouragement, being allowed everyday choices, and having enough activities to choose from. Having staff encourage them positively to behave well was also the strongest predictor of children feeling able to turn to staff for help with a problem. Staff being able to interact with children as individuals, encouraged their behaviour positively, and helped them look forward to the future, which appeared facilitated by the smaller ‘family’ groups.

The smaller ‘family’ groups were credited with helping relationships with staff (as with other children), by enabling more personal interaction that allowed children and staff to get to know each other as individuals, and leaving them more likely to turn to them for help. Conversely, if they felt that they were not treated as an individual or were depersonalised, they felt less cared for and less inclined to behave well in return. Similarly, how staff responded to their need (e.g. to call bells) was noted by children and translated into the extent of caring or discrimination.

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Although most felt that any complaints would be dealt with fairly, there was clear concern from children that this was undermined by their relative powerlessness in the face of staff culture. Unfairness was perceived particularly from children with poor relationships with staff (including feeling victimised) and children from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Overall, **staff** witnessed positive working relationships of all types during the early months of the pandemic. Almost all staff had positive relationships with colleagues, with strong themes of increased support and understanding, with improved communications within and outside of their teams despite restrictions. There was a mixed picture around whether workplace culture and morale were better or worse, depending on factors like sense of job purpose and management communication. There was a strong narrative from staff around improved team-spirit, bonded through common pressures, but some resentment towards isolating/shielding team-members. There was also some resentment of partner agencies who withdraw from sites, combined with more difficult communication and feeling like agencies did not understand the situation in sites.

Most staff were satisfied with interactions and communications with managers, feeling well-informed, with a substantial minority noting improvements from before the pandemic. There was a theme of feeling more “connected” to managers who were more available at this time, partly through better use of technology, but there were some who felt not listened or communicated with (particularly more junior staff). There was a gender element to perceived improvements during the pandemic – female staff were less likely to feel morale had been improved and that they were kept informed by management.

Almost half of all staff working in residential sites before and during the pandemic considered that staff-child relations were better than usual (just a small proportion considered them worse), with the narrative around having more meaningful interactions with a slower regime and with children organised into smaller family groups, a sense of cultural unity, and staff taking on a more of a parent/carer role. Almost all staff working directly with children described having good relationships with them during the pandemic. The only factor predicting staff experiencing good relationships with children was if they enjoyed helping them with their development.

Almost half of staff working in secure estate sites considered that children’s peer relations had improved from before the pandemic (just a small proportion considered them worse), with this more likely for staff in YOIs and those seeing better staff-child relationships and with improved working practices. In discussion, staff highlighted the role of smaller groups offering a break from existing negative culture.

**Parents and carers** noted how the loss of visits had impacted on family relationships, but described how increased telephone contact with their children had helped each cope with this loss. Subsidiary concerns were expressed that increased contact demands from children could sometimes be problematic, and that phone contact may have been deliberately limited as part of behaviour management. The use of video calls was positively received, although there were frustrations around technology and concerns around privacy.

**Senior leaders** were clear that the move to smaller ‘family’ groups had improved relationships between children. Similarly, the smaller groups and the slower regime had allowed quality time

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for caring child-staff relationships to develop, allowing staff to feel safer and less stressed, and interact with children as children (rather than as detainees). There was also a sense that child-staff relationships had benefitted from the move away from a formal IEP scheme and adjudications towards more constructive behaviour management. Although there was some frustration by senior leaders that in-person visits did not restart sooner, there was strong approval of having facilitated children's increased telephone contact with families. Video calls were also welcomed, and seen to indicate how technology could be developed and used further in the children's secure estate.

Senior leaders presented a strong theme around camaraderie between staff members, both working in sites and in headquarters (usually), and extending to senior leadership teams, albeit with a concern that this may be waning over an extended pandemic. There was disappointment that it was not possible to enable contractors providing services in sites to have more involvement during lockdown.

There was a view among **external stakeholders** that hindsight may judge the loss of all family and professional visits in YOIs during the initial lockdown to have been unnecessarily restrictive. There was praise for the increased ability of children to have telephone contact with families, but questioning of why phone credit is limited given the wellbeing and resettlement benefits. The development of video calls was also widely praised, but with some stakeholders seeing the delay in its introduction as an example of the lack of dexterity for meeting children's needs within a largely adult prison estate.

External stakeholders were very clear that the pandemic had seen improvement in relationships between children and staff, particularly in YOIs, citing the effect of introducing the smaller 'family' groups.

There was a theme of concern among stakeholders that the position of YCS within HMPs had restricted its flexibility to sufficiently support for the specific needs of children during the pandemic.

## 7. Roles and Development

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This chapter explores how children across the children's secure estate experienced their personal development and custody casework during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also explores staff roles and career development. For children, it considers personal growth and pro-social identity development, sentence planning, and preparation for leaving custody. For staff, it considers changes to their responsibilities, job satisfaction and sense of purpose, job difficulty and purpose, career development, and qualifications. It also looks at the roles staff felt they provided for children during the lockdown period. Senior leaders and external stakeholders reflections also consider YCS development.

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## Children's experiences

### Personal growth

Of children across the secure estate (N391), more than two-thirds (68%) reported having experienced personal growth during the pandemic. About half of children (48%) felt that they had done activities that had helped with that personal growth. About a third (31%) had found out something new about themselves or their qualities through dealing with the COVID-19 situation. About half (52%) were proud of something that they had done during the pandemic.

Significant predictors for experiencing growing as a person during lockdown highlighted the importance of enabling a sense of **personal achievement**, supported by **trusting, encouraging, and nurturing relationships with staff**. Children who were proud of something they've done during this time were three times as likely to consider that they've grown as a person.

In discussions, children presented a dominant narrative of 'growing' as a person during the lockdown situation in custody. For those in YOIs, the strongest theme in relation to drivers for personal change was having **more space for reflection** about themselves and their life. On the surface, this presented as more time in their rooms, but further exploration reveals this is less about solitude per se and more about a **'circuit-break' to "chill out" from an intensive culture**.

"Before Corona, [we] had fights and weapons. [But the pandemic has] now given a chance for everyone to chill out. Time to think about [whether to] fight, or chill out and get early [release]."

18-year-old, YOI

Conversely, in SCHs, the narrative could be more about growth from **learning to cope** with a more intense culture living together.

"Obviously, now that we're all been squished together on a unit, we're not allowed to get away. There's more kind of like arguments and heated situations. But then you kinda learn to step away from that and manage my emotions better."

16-year-old, SCH

Almost half of all children (48%) felt that they had "become a better person" during the lockdown. This is an indicator of pro-social identity development, which is crucial to positive child outcomes and central to YCS theory of change.

Significant predictors for pro-social identity development related to children's **access to activities** and support that **enable and reinforce a sense of personal achievement** and **progress preparing for release** by learning a helpful new skill or knowledge. In relation to staff reinforcing pro-social identity development, over half of children (53%) felt that a staff member had been proud of something that they had done.



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## Pro-social identity development: Activities

A child having learned new knowledge or skills specifically was strongly associated with pro-social identity development. Just under half of children (43%) considered that, during COVID-19, they had learned any knowledge or skills that would help them when released. The factors that enabled children gaining helpful knowledge/skills were having **resettlement preparation** including a training plan and help achieving targets, close family relationships/contact, supportive and caring relationships with staff, and feeling engaged with the regime. Knowing that they had a training plan setting out objectives and targets saw children three times as likely to feel that they had developed knowledge/skills to help them when they are released.

Reflecting the findings in quantitative analysis, another theme in drivers of personal growth raised by children was **opportunities for new activities**, and how in combination with the pride of the associated achievement helped children think differently about themselves.

“I am proud of being able to focus more, learn and putting my gardening business plan together.”

17-year-old, YOI

Personal growth was also characterised in children’s comments as showing the **ability to achieve a goal** (perhaps new skills or even managing to avoid trouble), increased **patience**, and finding resilience or strength in the adverse situation. More subsidiary themes included spiritual growth by finding religion and increased self-awareness of faults. These qualities related to how they **saw themselves differently**.

“I have been able to do a 1000-piece puzzle that I am proud of. Staff were also proud of me for doing this.”

18-year-old, YOI

## Pro-social identity development: Interactions and Roles

Three in five children (61%) considered that “taking responsibility during COVID-19 has helped them grow as a person”. Significant predictors for children recognising this growth from taking some responsibility at this time were **resettlement/release preparation, actively supportive staff relationships, close family relationships**, being **engaged with the regime**, access to the **regime and activities**, and identifying with **a religion** (perhaps as a source of moral obligation or guidance). Feeling that they were able to work towards goals for the future meant that children were five times as likely to consider that taking responsibility had seen them grow as a person.

There were several ways in which children characterised the way that they had grown, both in term of improving personal qualities and gaining new perspectives. Strong themes around improved personal qualities included both how they gained more **sense of agency** and responsibility for working towards their future, and how they showed increased **responsibility** for chores.

“Before I used to think that I had to rely on other people and now realise that I can do things for myself - like cooking, washing. Confidence has grown loads.”

17-year-old, STC



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Strong themes around growth characterised as new perspectives focused on children gaining **fresh appreciation** for normal life and family roles and wanting to change negative aspects of their life. These perspectives related more to how they saw their **future place in the world**, which together with seeing themselves qualitatively differently constitutes both aspects of how we understand identity in Constructive Resettlement.

“It also changes the other boys mind-set too. All conversations used to be about gangs and stabbings, but now we talk about other stuff like businesses and legit stuff like that, which is surprising. I think they realise if there was another pandemic, this is not the life.”  
18-year-old, YOI

Children recognised how their personal growth was already having positive impacts in terms of behaviour and relations with others, pointing in particular to **improved relationships** with family and other children inside the sites.

It was also clear that **positive affirmation from interactions** both inside and outside the site have helped to cement a child’s personal narrative of personal growth. Both fresh activities and positive interactions are recognised building blocks for pro-social identity development in YCS theory of change.

“People outside saying I’m learning, turning a corner.”  
17-year-old, YOI

“Staff have noticed changes in me - used to be a troublemaker, want to stay on gold, staff have commented on this.”  
18-year-old, YOI

## Sentence planning

About a third of children across the secure estate (36%) were **aware** of having a sentence plan setting out sentence objectives or targets.

For children in both YOIs (n312)<sup>6</sup> and STCs (n54), the proportion aware of having sentence plans was significantly lower than before the pandemic restrictions – down 14 percentage points and 16 percentage points respectively (**Table 7.1**).

**Table 7.1: Education in YOIs and STCs - Percentages in CoRE Child Survey vs pre-covid comparison**

	YOIs % during pandemic	YOIs % before pandemic	STCs % during pandemic	STCs % before pandemic
Aware of having a plan setting out objectives/targets	33	57	38	54

<sup>6</sup> The comparison figures are from the most recent pre-pandemic HMI Prisons surveys in each site (see CoRE Research Methods section: Annex A). No comparisons existed for SCH.

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Staff supporting children to achieve objectives/targets*	67	47	(94)	(91)
Staff helping children prepare to leave custody	(30)	(30)	(40)	(45)
Had a say in what will happen to me when I leave here	52	37	(52)	(49)

Base = All in YOIs (n312; 22-32 missing) and STCs (n54; 1-2 missing). \*Base = All aware of a training plan in YOIs (n92; 0 missing) and STCs. Numbers in parentheses () = not significant difference at  $p < 0.05$

Significant predictors for children being aware of their sentence plan during these early lockdown months were having a **fuller regime**, **staff relationships that encourage good behaviour**, and **staff relationships that encourage education**, work or training. Each of these factors doubled the likelihood of children being aware of a sentence plan for them.

Of the children aware of their sentence plan across the secure estate (n122), almost three-quarters (74%) felt that staff had supported them during the pandemic to achieve the associated objectives or targets. Indeed, in YOIs, the proportion experiencing such staff support increased significantly and substantially from before the pandemic (by 20 percentage points) ([Table 7.1](#)).

The only significant predictor for children feeling supported by staff was if the child had **access to a fuller regime** out of their rooms. Children who spent more than two hours out of their rooms on weekdays were almost five times as likely to feel supported.

The importance of having activities in the regime to allow children a sense of progress was also reflected in their comments. As the children below reflected despondently, planning for the future and making any progress on resettlement plans is difficult if they are confined to their rooms or activities are suspended:

“Sat behind door so plans don’t matter”  
16-year-old, YOI

“Planning for the future is hard because everything is delayed.”  
17-year-old, SCH

Children expressed frustration at the effect of regime support on their ability to meet sentence plan targets, and their concern about how this would affect their opportunities for early release and to get on with their lives. As the second child below illustrates, this could bring a demotivating feeling of their life being “on pause” with no sense of development:

“Everything’s been put on hold. I was supposed to do my targets to get my early. I might not get my early cos no one’s helped me try and achieve my targets. If I don’t get my early release now, it’s cos staff aren’t helping me. Cos I’m in for a violent crime I have to do so many things to show that I’ve learned.”  
17-year-old, YOI

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“Preparation for the future is worse because there's no interventions, and I wanted to do as many as possible. I feel like I'm on pause.”

17-year-old, YOI

Interruption of education and training was the first of two dominant concerns from children in fulfilling sentence plans, whether in obtaining their CSCS [health and safety] construction working card or basic qualifications. They recognised that this interruption was a wasted opportunity and a barrier to successful resettlement:

“Preparation is worse, so I don't feel as prepared for the future – would have liked to have left with my Maths and English.”

16-year-old, YOI

“Before you could do things like construction and I could get my CSCS card, and now I can't choose.”

18-year-old, YOI

The second dominant concern from children was the impact of the interruption to temporary release. Children recognised the importance of this for resettlement preparation and rightly noted it as a “big setback” in both cultural reintegration and arranging future support:

“ROTL has completed finished at the moment during COVID. Want to see this back - this would help me reintegrate into the community.”

16-year-old, YOI

“Before I would have been able to go on ROTL so could go to college or a job. But can't do that now so it's a big setback.”

17-year-old, YOI

Indeed, the cessation of temporary release felt like a pause or regression in their sentence plans or development, particularly if the child had already started this in preparation for release:

“Most of my targets are about ROTL but that's been put on hold as we can't go out now.”

17-year-old, YOI

“So I did two [temporary release] plans in, from about November until about February/March and then a third mobility plan was to be put through, but COVID put us in our rooms and stuff. And the YCS have been adamant that no one is allowed out. So that has prevented my progression really, so it's potentially jeopardised my release, you know. I just think if COVID didn't happen now, I would've been out a lot in the community. It's difficult.”

18-year-old, SCH

## Preparation for leaving custody

Only a third of all children (33%) considered that staff had helped them prepare to leave custody during the initial lockdown.

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Whether in YOIs or STCs, the proportion feeling that staff had helped them prepare for leaving was not significantly different from before the pandemic (**Table 7.1**). Similarly, for children who had been in custody before lockdown (n257), the large majority (84%) felt that preparation for the future was no worse than usual, and a quarter (25%) felt that it was better.

Significant predictors for children considering that staff had helped them prepare for custody were if staff had given them **behavioural encouragement**, **feeling cared for by staff**, and awareness of **having a sentence plan**. Being in a STC lowered the odds of staff helping them prepare. When staff praised good behaviour, children were three and a half times more likely to feel that staff were helping them prepare for the future.

The only significant predictor for children who had been in custody previously considering that staff had helped more during the pandemic was if they also felt that staff were now treating them more as an individual.

About half of children (49%) considered that they had received help making plans that meant they probably would not offend again. Again, the strongest significant predictor for children considering that they had received the right help to stop them offending was staff encouraging positive behaviour, which increased the odds by almost four times. Other significant factors were feeling cultural responsibility in the coping with pandemic (a part to play), and a fuller regime.

Discussions with children reflected this importance of encouraging and supportive staff relationships for preparation for release – both in terms of caseworkers helping them consider their futures and providing practical assistance:

“My caseworker has been helping me get ready for release, asking you questions, and getting me to think about what I can do jobwise.”

17-year-old, YOI

“Staff have been encouraging me to go college and that. My case worker and YOT worker have been helping me prepare for the future and not break the law.”

16-year-old, YOI

“Going to college, caseworker been supportive – they helped with a college interview.”

18-year-old, YOI

Conversely, when support with preparation was discussed as worse, children described this as the result of less access to or involvement by caseworkers, both from inside and outside the site. Perhaps an illustration of the particular difficulties with resettlement support from being in an STC, the second quotation below notes how this could make the child feel like they were alone in trying to prepare for release:

“Preparation for future has been worse - harder to speak to YOT, Probation and my Caseworker.”

17-year-old, YOI

“No one really helps me to prepare for the future but myself.”

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16-year-old, STC

## Children's involvement in resettlement planning

The small majority of the children (53%) felt that they had a say in what will happen to them when they leave custody. However, in YOIs, the proportion was significantly higher than when asked before the pandemic (up 15 percentage points). The two significant predictors related to **contact with home** and having **someone to talk to** about how they felt. Children who felt they had enough family contact were four times more likely to feel they had a say in what will happen to them.

Discussions with children reflected how a sense of agency in their resettlement planning simply depended upon whether they were able to talk through ideas about their future with staff members and others:

“Some staff members help make plans for the future (Officers). I have had a say in what will happen when I leave here because I’ve been able to have discussions with staff members about what I’m going to do in the future.”

18-year-old, YOI

## Working towards personal goals for the future

About two-thirds of children (64%) were able to work towards their own future goals during the initial lockdown.

Significant predictors for children being able to work towards their future goals were being able to keep **in touch enough with family**, **staff positive behaviour encouragement**, a **full regime**, and feeling that there were **people who cared** about them on site. Children who were able to keep in touch with family enough were more than six times more likely to feel able to work towards their own future goals. In addition, children who had **not previously experienced being in care** (of their Local Authority) were almost twice as likely to feel able to work towards their own future goals.

In discussions, there was a theme from children that (as for people outside), the pandemic gave pause for thought and reflection on the future. In addition, the break from routine had reinforced this:

“A little bit of time to self-reflect; I was here for 6 months before COVID started. Quite a busy 6 months out of my room, COVID has allowed me to think for a bit about my past and what my future will look like.”

17-year-old, YOI

“More time to think - like think about what I’m going to do when I’m out and stuff.”

16-year-old, STC

Indeed, this “slow down” from the usual culture could ignite new interests and highlight new directions, aided by positive encouragement from staff about how they should see themselves:

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“Found a passion for wanting to go to army. Need some discipline in my life and that will be a positive. I’m at a crossroads in my life turn 18 soon. Thinking do I want to be legal and credible or do I want to keep running round. COVID slowed my brain down and thinking more.”

17-year-old, YOI

“The teachers told me I’ve learned so fast – they want me to go to college and this made me feel good. It helped to think about future goals.”

16-year-old, SCH

## Staff experiences

### Changes to work roles and responsibilities

Almost all staff had some **different work roles** or responsibilities due to COVID-19 (92%).

Of all staff involved in running the children’s secure estate (N1220 responses), about one in six (17%) considered that their work activities were better during the COVID-19 period. However, a third (32%) felt that they were worse than usual.

Staff were more likely to consider their work activities to be better if they had positive **relationship with colleagues** and considered there to be **cultural unity against COVID-19**. Staff were also more likely to identify an improvement in their work activities if they were **studying for a qualification** at the time and had spent **a relatively short time working** in youth justice. However, staff working within **establishment sites** were less likely to identify an improvement in work activities, compared to staff working at HQ.

Focusing specifically on staff continuing to work with children during the initial pandemic period (n617), almost one in five (19%) considered that their work activities were better during the COVID-19 period.

These staff were more likely to identify an improvement in work activities if there was better **communication with management** and **workplace culture**. Those who were **studying for a qualification** and **working in an SCH** were also more likely to consider their work activities to be better. Additionally, staff were more likely to identify improvements in work activities if they also identified positive **changes in working**, related to the difficulty of their role, and improved **safety from harm**.

Not being able to carry out usual work activity at all was a prominent theme in comments from staff, particularly non-operational on-site staff, but sometimes at headquarters. The pandemic resulted in some parts of people’s **jobs stopping** all together, which could result in a sudden fall in workload or being changed to another role (although not always considered appropriate):

“I am not able to do half of my workload due to certain tasks being stopped due to COVID-19.”

Female, YOI

“Pretty much everything that I would usually do within my role has been stopped as I have a prisoner-facing role and with the restrictions, I am not permitted to see the boys.”



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Female, YOI

"We have been helping with various departments from kitchens to safeguarding."

Male, YOI

"COVID work just kind of got picked up straight away, and then so my old role was pretty much completely dropped, and I was put into this whole completely different role."

Female, YCS HQ

"Less on workload some days. However, expected to do other jobs we shouldn't have been doing. I've been sent shopping. What is that all about?!!"

Female, YOI

However, the experience for other staff was that the pandemic brought **additional tasks** to their usual workload, or their usual tasks took longer due to restrictions, or they had to cover colleagues:

"As teaching staff we have had to work without teaching assistants, and have had to take on their roles additionally for example, completing morning and evening building checks, escorting young people to the toilet, and sometimes having to spend time upstairs for breakfasts or lunch times as RSW [residential] staff has been short."

Female, SCH

"More volume of work i.e. normal role and responsibilities didn't reduce and then had extra work on top i.e. managing covid changes needed, plus having to offer more emotional support to subordinates."

Male, SCH

"Court appearances, ensuring we have the correct time and date as well as a video link for the appearances. Assisting by being the appropriate adult if needed, or at least explaining to the young person what is happening. This has taken hours of time for some cases, which takes you away from other duties."

Female, STC

"I have had to take on an additional two functions and am managing 30 staff due to covid related absences."

Male, YOI

On-site staff noted in particular the increase in tasks that public health provisions (mainly **cleaning**) brought to their work, which may have brought resentment in some staff:

"Cleaning RCU and unit/showers when we were on the initial shut down/regime limitations."

Female, YOI

"Responsible for stricter cleaning of Units, more responsibility for making sure YP are fed, washing etc - covid units."

Female, STC

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“We are basically cleaners... I have not done my 'job' at all as we are simply glorified cleaners.”

Female, YOI

Another subsidiary theme from both onsite and offsite staff was the additional work/roles involved in **supporting staff wellbeing** that came with the pandemic:

“I have been asked to provide some support to staff who are off due to shielding or who have tested positive. This has generally involved a friendly phone call to see how they are doing. This has been positively received.”

Male, YOI

“Ensuring that the staff I supervise are well and dealing with any concerns on a daily basis.”

Female, SCH

“I've taken on that peer support thing as well, that's another responsibility.”

Female, YCS HQ

A particular feature of lockdown recounted by headquarters staff was that there seemed to be an **increase in meetings**, now online, while still being expected to fulfil their usual workload. This is explored further in the briefing on staff wellbeing:

“It has felt at times like the workload has increased and there is no account of the personal circumstances of our people. Some of us have had children at home and had to continue to work at pace. I have felt at times that there is an expectation for you to work harder and longer to prove you are doing something worthwhile. I have had entire days of back-to-back meetings with no break and then still get chased for work as if I have not been doing anything else.”

Female, YCS HQ

## Job satisfaction

Although half of staff (50%) felt that they had the same level of job satisfaction as before, about a quarter (23%) felt it had improved during this period, with a similar proportion (27%) feeling that it had worsened.

Focusing on staff working directly with children (n617), more than a quarter (27%) experienced better job satisfaction than before the pandemic. These staff were more likely to experience better job satisfaction if they also experienced a better **sense of purpose, workplace culture or work activities**.

The reflection on life that COVID brought generally, also extended to those working in the secure estate **reflecting on their career**. Perhaps inevitably, this could lead to feeling unsettled with staff members questioning if their role brought enough satisfaction in their life:

“Although I moan about the interruptions, COVID-19 has made me reflect on the mundane nature of my job.”

Female, STC

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The change in roles for staff during the pandemic brought a theme of satisfaction in coping and contributing. Staff might find themselves needing to 'muck in' together in order to help out with priority tasks, which could bring a sense of both **teamwork and professional pride**:

"I feel a sense of pride as I have helped the Admin team in areas I don't normally do (...) I absolutely love my job and feel that my part in this awful time has made a difference!"  
Female, SCH

A subsidiary theme was the satisfaction from temporary **promotions** due to the pandemic:

"I gained a temporary promotion during COVID, so my job satisfaction has improved during this period."  
Female, YCS HQ

In contrast, a change or restriction in role brought a lack of satisfaction for some, replaced by **frustration or boredom**:

"As the manager of the gym I have been unable to deliver any PE regime, and this has been frustrating for me and the staff."  
Female, YOI

"It has been difficult as I have been unable to do my actual job which has been boring at times."  
Female, YOI

"Still full team in our department where jobs have been removed from our day-to-day routine. Half the time I find myself sitting and staring at the walls because we have nothing left to do, and again this makes me very angry and upset (...) No offer of splitting our shifts or give me the consideration in protecting my family by staying at home. (...) Total no respect working for the prison service anymore and would like to leave very soon."  
Female, YOI

A strong theme from staff was that they felt **contribution was appreciated** by others in their organisation, including managers. Extra practical support provided by management, including food, was seen as evidence that their efforts were valued:

"[I appreciated] providing staff who were in work every day initially with care, support with childcare and, at times, food and drink being delivered, and the staff being thought of and feeling valued."  
Male, YOI

There was a subsidiary theme from staff working on-site across providers who did not work directly with children that their contribution was **undervalued**, perhaps because they were not involved in payment or bonus schemes:

"Not all staff were recognised for coming in, only operational staff."  
Female, STC

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“Payment plus was only geared towards operational staff and did not take into account non-operational positive contribution within the centre. This was a massive negative approach and further deepens the divide, and feels undervalued.”

Female, STC

In addition, there was a small subsidiary theme from staff that an emphasis on staff caring for children during the pandemic underlined a “soft” approach that left “prison” staff **culturally frustrated**:

“I now want to leave YCS and go to an adult prison (...) It has made no difference to how I do my job but a big difference on my view of YCS (...) I now strongly dislike my job due to the decisions made by the YCS and them being so soft on their view of the offenders (...) My main concern whilst at work is the safety of my colleagues. With the increase in staff assaults and the serious nature of the crimes that these offenders are now in prison for it is hard [for me] to put the prisoners first. (...) The current child friendly approach doesn't work. These offenders need discipline and rules so they can actually learn to function in society rather than the hand holding nanny state that [YOI] has become.”

Male, YOI

## Sense of purpose

More than a quarter (30%) of staff felt that their sense of purpose in the job had improved, while almost a quarter (24%) felt it was worse.

Where staff had undergone substantial interruption or change in their working practice or role, there could be a sense of **disorientation about their purpose**. There was an indication this was improving within months of lockdown starting, but that it involved a certain amount of adjustment or reorientation around finding a new sense of purpose or identity within the secure estate:

“Due to COVID-19 restrictions our workload decreased as young people were on lockdown impacting the amount of security intel received. This impacts job satisfaction and sense of purpose within my department.”

Male, YOI

“It is very difficult going into work every day and struggling to find things to do. At this point in my career I have a strong desire to learn and develop my knowledge and skills. (...) My role is very specific which has made it difficult as the majority of my duties cannot be completed and it has been very slow.”

Female, YOI

“It's been difficult to adjust but once we got there, I feel like staff morale and sense of purpose have started to get better, but it's taken a little while.”

Female, YOI

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## Job difficulty

About one in five staff (22%) found the job harder during the pandemic. Focusing on staff continuing to work with children during the early pandemic period (n617) finds a similar proportion of about one in five (21%) considered the job harder than before.

Staff working directly with children were more likely to find the job more difficult than before if they felt **less safe from harm**, and considered the **work activities** to be worse than before. However, this was mitigated by having a **work-life balance**.

As with every sector, staff working in and with the secure estate suddenly found themselves needing to learn new and different types of technology. Staff working from home were particularly reliant on video conferencing and phone calls, although **technology problems** or work hardware incompatibility sometimes made this particularly challenging:

“As [I’m] home working (shielding), I am unable to have face to face mentoring of staff but have continued to review YCS [work] by phone calls. [I’m] unable to access MS Teams from Quantum laptop so only having Conference calls with YCS and digital colleagues.”  
Male, YOI

“Some staff do not have access to necessary equipment to work from home.”  
Female, YCS HQ

Staff both on sites and in headquarters highlighted the **difficulties of communication** through remote meetings, particularly if they had not yet built rapport with the other participants:

“[It is] difficult to chair meetings via telephone with people you have not met.”  
Male, YCS HQ

“I have struggled in meetings when staff have been dialling in – I prefer the more face to face meetings.”  
45-54-years-old male, YOI residential

In contrast to the above concerns about online meetings for workload and rapport, staff noted how it had made aspects of their work easier or more **efficient**:

“Using video and teleconferencing facilities has resulted in me being able to attend meetings in multiple establishments in a day. Not having to travel has increased my output.”  
Male, YCS HQ

## Job performance

About half of staff (51%) reported that there were parts of their job that they have been able to do better during COVID-19 restrictions. By the same token, about half (52%) have found that there were parts of their job that they were not able to do as well.

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Focusing on staff working with children (n617), again about half (53%) considered that there were parts of the job that they could do better during the pandemic. Significant predictors were if the experience had **changed the way they approach their job**, better **management communication**, and better **workplace culture**.

Half of staff working with children (50%) identified parts of the job that they could not do as well because of the COVID-19 restrictions. Staff were more likely to identify parts of the job where they could not perform as well if they had **line management responsibility**. However, **operational staff** and those staff who achieved a **work-life balance** were less likely to note parts of the job where they could not perform as well. In addition, having to **isolate for a period** was a significant predictor for having parts of the job they could both do better and not so well.

More than half of staff (57%) felt that the experience gained working through the pandemic had changed the way that they **approach their job**, with half (50%) considering that it had improved the way they work.

There was a theme from staff of personal or professional **growth**. For some, the pandemic was clearly a time of reflexive learning, necessitating different perspectives and approaches:

“Personally, I have learned a lot about my work, the establishment and myself during the pandemic.”

Male, YOI

## Career development and qualifications

While the majority (63%) of all staff considered that the situation had made no difference to their **career development**, one in five (22%) felt that it had helped it, while one in seven (14%) felt that it had been harmed.

Of those staff who were studying for a qualification (n241), two in five (41%) considered that COVID-19 had interrupted their progress towards gaining a qualification. The small majority of those staff (55%) were allowed as much time as before to study towards their qualification in working hours.

Staff were more likely to consider that their qualification progress had been interrupted by COVID-19 if they experienced poor **wellbeing** or had **responsibilities additional to their role** (such as the Staff Care Team). However, staff were less likely to experience interruption to their qualification progress if they had achieved a **work-life balance**.

Professional development was a strong theme in comments from staff. Staff noted the opportunities for development that came from **new tasks or roles** during the pandemic:

“Definitely helpful [for development] as I have been able to complete tasks that I don't normally do.”

Female, SCH

“I have had the opportunity to grow in a professional sense since the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because I have had the chance to contribute to different tasks that I wouldn't



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usually be exposed to in normal conditions. I feel I have come a long way professionally since COVID-19 began, which has also allowed me to develop confidence in my role.”  
Female, YOI

There was a theme from staff that the restrictions to job activities brought by lockdown conversely allowed **more time for training** and working on professional development. Similarly, it there was a subsidiary theme that it also allowed time for reflexive learning. Other staff noted that they had more time to help with training and developing others:

“More training and time to read and think during lockdown, which was good.”  
Female, YOI

“Has given me more time to help with staff development and 1-1 sessions.”  
Female, SCH

## Identity as a key worker

During the pandemic, it is clear that staff working on-site took on the identity of a “**frontline**” and “key worker” in the face of the virus. However, there was evidence of an unsettling disconnect staff felt between the “frontline” role that they felt they served during the pandemic and their perception that the public did not see them as such.

“Just disappointed that prison staff did not have the benefits as other keyworkers in the public did and not mentioned or seen to be on frontline like others. Felt like the forgotten service.”  
Female, YOI

Similarly, there were also staff who felt that others in the secure estate did not consider them to be ‘frontline’ because if were not working directly with children.

“I feel like the OSG [gate] role has been forgotten about because we are the ones at the front of the prison that deal with visitors/people we don’t know that are coming in.”  
Female, YOI

## Staff roles with children

For staff still working with children (n617), three quarters (75%) considered that they provided a “parent/carer” role during this time, with almost half of those (45%) doing so more than usual. Staff were more likely to consider that they had provided a parent/carer role if they enjoyed **supporting child development**, but were less likely if they were in a **non-operational** department. Significant predictors for staff considering that they provided a parent/carer role more during the pandemic than previously were if they experienced **better ways of working** and a **better workplace culture**.

Of staff still working with children, slightly more than half (56%) considered they had a provided a “disciplinarian” role, although a third (36%) of these felt this role was reduced during the pandemic. Staff considering this was more likely if they had **line management responsibility** or were working in an **operational** department. Significant predictors of staff having a less

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disciplinarian role than before the pandemic were if they had developed **better ways of working**, were based in **YOIs** and had **line management** responsibility.

Of staff still working with children, almost two-thirds (62%) considered that they had provided a “protector” role, with a third of them (38%) feeling that they did so more during the pandemic. Significant predictors were working in an **operational** department or on the **RCU**, and **feeling they do their job better** during COVID-19.

Of staff still working with children, about four in ten (39%) considered that they provided a “friend” role to the children, and almost half of them (40%) felt they did so more during the pandemic.

About two thirds of staff (63%) considered that they had provided the role of “teacher”, with four in ten of them (40%) considering they did so more during the pandemic than previously.

The need to take on more of a carer role was not welcomed by all staff in YOIs, with some feeling disempowered in their perceived carer role as “prison officers”:

“Just appears to have stopped staff from actually being an officer and more like a babysitter. No power to the staff.”  
Male, YOI

## Parents’ and carers’ reflections

### Children’s development

Some parents discussed their active involvement in trying to help with their child’s development, in particular **encouraging interests** or positive skills. The parents below found contrasting support from sites in making this happen. The first parent, while critical of the SCH for not looking itself to find a child’s interest, received cooperation. The second parent found that their attempt to foster their child’s interest in business (as well as alleviate boredom) was thwarted by the YOI:

“I’ve actually helped my son to find an activity that he likes, with his piano lessons, and they have put that in place for him. I think they need to maybe prompt the kids more and see where the passion is, where the talent is, you know. It doesn’t always have to be academic, not everyone is academic, some people are naturally gifted, talented. And I think when they’re in places like that, they should see if they’ve got underlying talents, you know what I mean? (...) And once they find that, they’ve got to make a child have a sense of self-worth. (...) So I think if, if they haven’t got a supportive parent, there must be somebody there to push that hope back into them.”  
Mother, SCH

“There were some like not only business books, but also some kind of biographies and stuff he wanted to read, to obviously kill the time. But it was not received (...) it was sent straight from Amazon.”  
Mother, YOI

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## Resettlement plans and support

Parents expressed frustration that the COVID-19 restrictions had meant that their child was **not able to engage in resettlement plans** that would have prepared them for release from custody. This in turn provoked anxiety in the parent for the child's future.

"COVID impacted in that it delayed everything, then it stopped him. They were trying to allow him to ask for permission to go and have a view of the house once it had been found for him. But the authorities said no because of COVID (...) There was none of that sort of gradual build up to release that they would normally go through, and it was gonna be a bit of a shock for him. He never got a chance to meet anybody who's going to be looking after him, he didn't get see where he would be living. And I think that's all quite stressful for him."  
Mother, SCH

Similarly, the parent below expressed concerns that the pandemic had reduced the wellbeing support that her child had received from specialist service prior to her **transition to another site**:

"But I know they're trying their best as much as possible. I understand that if the team can't come in then the team can't come in. I just kind of hope that they manage to do more work with her before she goes to [another site]. I don't know what [another site] is like for her and that worries me. [Child] self-harmed before and I don't think she'd have any qualms of trying to do it again if I'm being honest, because that's how she deals."  
Mother, SCH

## Senior leaders' reflections

### Staff roles and development

Senior leaders in sites recognised that they and their staff adopted **more of a parent/carer role** with the children during the pandemic.

"I think the staff, the senior management team really took [children not seeing their parents] on board, and took on the role of parents and showed that level of compassion and "Let's have a chat" and "How are things, what are you worried about?" Relationships with the boys kind of improved because you put on different hats because you understood, well actually, they're deprived of something that, you know."  
Senior Leader, YO1

There was a sense from senior leaders that the pandemic had highlighted for staff the vulnerable needs of children in their care, which had resulted in a clearer **collective sense of purpose** for everyone involved, built around their childcare role:

"In some ways it's been a very positive experience because I think it's really helped galvanise the team together. I think it's given us sort of a sense of common purpose. I think it's generally been really, really positive for me that I could see the team working so hard to get through this period. And the staff you have in 99% of cases really stepped up to the mark during COVID really taking their responsibilities seriously, really understood the role that they have, that these are vulnerable children. I think strangely, they're

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probably seen more of that vulnerability during COVID because the kids have been able to express and show it more.”

Senior Leader, STC

Conversely, there was some concern from site senior leaders that if and when their institution reverted to larger numbers and groups, with a fuller regime, staff that had joined during the pandemic would **not be experienced** to deal with likely increased incidents:

“I think my biggest worry is that we've have staff who've joined us whose experience of what is normal is now very skewed. The reality of going back to a place where we've got 80 children in the centre with a much fuller regime (...) The staff weren't using force so frequently (...) and the times when they then did need to use force, they become less familiar with holds and things like that.”

Senior Leader, STC

This perceived shift in staff role towards being a carer was welcomed by senior leaders in YCS headquarters as very much in line with broader staff development and culture reform aims:

“One of the challenges that the YCS has about being part of HMPPS (...) the vast majority of our staff joined to be prison officers. They didn't join to be youth workers, they didn't join to do the caring bits. And, although many of them do that very well, part of our challenge is how we shift the workforce into a group that see themselves as doing that caring in a more holistic way, rather than a ‘custodial with a bit of caring’ way.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

## YCS organisational development

There was a view among YCS senior leaders that there was more **cohesion** between sites and headquarters during the pandemic than previously, which could be developed into the future:

“[Before COVID], it almost felt like [sites] didn't really want to have much to do with headquarters. I think they saw YCS as this thing over there and that they were here. I think what this has done, I hope, has brought us closer. Hopefully we see ourselves more as a kind of a joint entity. And so building on that feels really important.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“We have been working on a common priority, probably for the first time in a while, and it's really enabled these collaborative relationships. It's meant that people in teams have met other people across the YCS they probably haven't spoken to for years, if ever at all. So there's quite a lot of good that's come out of it in that sense, in the same way as it has in the community, really. Like people, people gravitate to people in a crisis and, and it has pulled together some of the team in that way.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

Although there was a strong theme from senior leaders that children's needs had been secondary or lost among the concerns of the larger adult estate, there was some hope that the pandemic had highlighted this as an issue within the HMPPS organisation. Leaders within YCS were pointing to some signs that their voices were being heard more, and that the **peculiarity of the children's secure estate was being recognised**:

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“We've helpfully built links again with HMPPS where there is a more aligned understanding now that we look after children, and those children are really, really vulnerable. And actually, our focus should be more on maintaining parity with vulnerable children in the community than it should be on maintaining parity with prisoners there over the age of 18.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“It feels like a lot of people now, when they talk in HMPPS meetings, will talk about prison, probation and YCS. And we're not an afterthought quite the way that we were before. Now, we might still be an afterthought, but at least people are saying it. So, in terms of our reputation, I think has grown a bit. And I think also because we have, we've really kind of stood up and gone, “No that doesn't work for YCS, and we've then also put forward and suggested things that do, I think actually that has enhanced reputation, both within the department, and then also, our reputation has been improved with stakeholders and comms and things like that.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

“I think [HMPPS leaders] are getting the difference now as well. So I think [the pandemic] has helped us articulate the difference between adults and children, particularly as things become less busy than they were at the beginning, over the summer period we've been able to articulate that in a bit more space, with a bit more clarity. Hopefully stakeholders see that we're doing our best under very difficult circumstances.”

Senior Leader, YCS HQ

## External stakeholders' reflections

### Children's development

There was a strong and widespread theme from different external stakeholders that the YCS and children's secure estate had done well during lockdown in terms of children staying well, feeling safer, and having better relationships with staff. However, there was a frustration that these improvements provided an **opportunity for innovation** and reform in working with children that does not yet seem to have been grasped. There was a subsidiary theme that this could involve more innovative use of technology:

“I think there has to be an acceptance that the people in our care feel a lot safer, there's a lot more staff around to meet their needs and we need to build on the success that COVID has forced upon us and break the cycle. There's got to be a willingness to try different things, get community groups involved and change the way we do things in the youth custody estate.”

Representative organisation

“I think they've done a really stellar job with what they've got, but I don't think the boundaries have been pushed far enough would be my feeling (...) You could more intensively have worked with the kids, even in YOI, and maybe turn things around for them in a way that unfortunately we know doesn't happen at the moment in custody. I think that that we would say they've done a really good job of trying to do the best in the circumstances. But I think they, rather than accept the box as the box was, they could

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have tried to reinvent the box would be my [view] (...) the potential to capitalise on this smaller units, better relationships.”

Governance body

“If we could get more agreement to put more technology into cells of children, and just be a bit more innovative, I think that would be fantastic.”

Public sector service provider

There was a view from stakeholders that organising children into **smaller groups** had not only improved relationships but would prove better for children’s ability to develop positively when in custody:

“Across the sector, people have the view that children are going to do better in smaller groups. I would be delighted if that was something that was taken forward, if they would. I don't feel that there's going to be an entire redesign of the security around smaller groups. But, if there were smaller units that could come out of it, I think that would be a real positive thing.”

Governance body

## Resettlement plans and support

Stakeholders observed that sites, with community partners, had continued to plan for structural support for children released from custody. However, it was recognised that the pandemic had affected the ability to hold **resettlement planning** meetings and **limited any development in reform** to provide more effective personal support in line with Constructive Resettlement:

“It has definitely impacted on resettlement reviews taking place, parents being able to come to those reviews and so there has been, there has definitely been, some impact.”

Governance body

“[YOIs have] been doing the basics in terms of trying their best not to release people to homelessness, trying to get the risk levels sorted out, but in terms of working with children to sort of change their identity, that's been stopped throughout.”

Governance body

## Staff development

A strong theme among stakeholders involved in the statutory governance was around the **childcare role of staff** working with children in custody. The view, consistent with findings from the staff survey, was that the lockdown had led to staff recognising themselves in more of a parenting role in the children’s safety and development. Again, it was felt that this had been encouraged by organising children into small ‘family’ groups:

“When I talk about these small groups, these officers have been seeing themselves more of a parental figure or more in a sort of family sort of role, there's a real opportunity there for those [residential] staff that see the children the most to see their role as knowing what that individual child’s aspirations are, what their needs are, what sort of interventions they’re getting around the site. And to properly encourage and cajole in the way that a parent would, and notice when they’re not doing so well, and congratulate when they



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when they achieve, in a way that we haven't regularly seen in the in the children's estate with those frontline residential officers."

Governance body

This development in staff role was seen as positive, and in line with a need to ensure a workforce that was focused on children's care and development:

"[Children feeling safer] was also about relationships with staff. It must also be about how well tension is de-escalated and the management of potential flashpoints. (...) Maybe different skills amongst staff, where relationship is really important and the ability not to immediately move to restraint force. This kind of workforce strategy has always felt like it's necessary, but it seems to be underlined, I think, by the pandemic. (...) How do we bring in a different sort of workforce, a different ethos, a different mindset that doesn't see the first [response] to you go for is "in your bedroom", dealing with very complex, challenging children. It is a different mindset into the workforce, (...) people who want to care for children as their primary aim."

Governance body

"We have obviously we now have the wider custody kind of qualification and I hope that is helping people to think in that way, and I think maybe COVID has sped that up because they should be thinking of themselves as corporate parents while [young] people are in our care, same way as social workers and other people are involved in that kind of caring for children.

Governance body

## YCS development

There were two main themes among stakeholders when considering the development of YCS during the pandemic and moving forwards. First, it was supported in reforms to ensure a **more child-centred** or Child First secure estate, recognised during the pandemic. Second, and related, it was encouraged to **develop its voice** and identity to ensure meeting the specific needs of children:

"Keep moving forward with the vision, this positive peace and a custody service that is children centred."

Governance body

"Previously, [YCS] was a custody service that happened to have children, and I really wanted it to be a children's service, that also has an element of custody in it. And that's where [YCS Executive Director] is. She has needed confidence to know that she is right in that thinking, and that encouragement, and in terms of pushing and reforming the service."

Public sector service provider

"I want them to truly be their own organisation. I want them to grow a set of balls and just say, 'HMPPS, you know what? We're over here'."

Private sector service provider

"Definitely I would say that over the course of the pandemic things have drastically improved [in terms of a child focus]. In the early months, I think there was a real challenge

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with separating out the response from adults and the response for children. (...) But I would say that across the period, it has improved. (...) I think [the YCS is] beginning to throw their weight around a bit more, (...) they seem to be getting results more than they were at the beginning.”

Governance body

## Summary

More than two-thirds of **children** in custody experienced personal growth during the pandemic. This personal growth depended on having a sense of achievement during this time, supported by encouraging relationships with staff. Most children considered that taking some responsibility during the pandemic helped them grow as a person. In YOIs specifically, the lockdown had enabled this personal growth by offering children space from an intensive culture.

Almost half of all children experienced pro-social identity development (“I’ve become a better person”), critical to positive child outcomes after custody, which depended on having access to activities, personal achievement, and progress in preparing for release. Most children felt that a staff member had been proud of something they had done, which will help foster pro-social identity development.

Just under half of children had learned knowledge/skills they felt would be helpful after release, which was predicted by having resettlement preparation, family contact, supportive staff relationships, and feeling engaged with the regime.

Only a third of children considered that staff had helped them prepare to leave custody, and half experienced help making plans that would mean they would not reoffend - the strongest predictive factor for both was positive behaviour reinforcement from staff. Fewer children than before the pandemic were aware of sentence plans (in YOIs/STCs), and resettlement progress was disrupted by restrictions to education and temporary release. However, when aware of sentence planning, children in YOIs were more likely than previously to feel supported in achieving objectives, and that they had a say in what would happen on release. Feeling supported was predicted by having more time out of rooms.

However, forming and working towards future goals relied again on positive encouragement and support from inside or outside the site – which saw children who had experienced being in care significantly disadvantaged.

Almost all **staff** had altered work roles or responsibilities during the early months of the pandemic, often including additional tasks (e.g. cleaning, staff wellbeing). However, the way that staff experienced these changes was very mixed. In every aspect, a substantial minority considered the situation better and a similar (sometimes larger) minority found it worse. Common factors making the difference included relationships and communication with colleagues and management, work-life balance, and their experience of workplace culture. Having to engage in work online could make tasks easier and more efficient, but technology failings and limitations also brought frustrations.

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There was a theme of personal or professional growth at this time, with staff citing their new tasks or roles. However, having a reduced role due to restrictions could bring less satisfaction, feeling undervalued, and a sense of disorientation about their purpose.

Three-quarters of staff working with children felt that they provided a “parent/carer” role during this time, with almost half of those doing so more than usual, predicted by factors such as whether they enjoyed supporting child development. Conversely, half of staff felt they provided a “disciplinarian” role to children with a third feeling they had done this less during the pandemic. This shift to more of a carer role was not welcomed by all staff in YOIs, with a small theme from some of feeling disempowered from being “prison officers”.

**Parents and carers** found contrasting support from sites in their own efforts to help with child development. They expressed frustration that the restrictions had reduced support activity for resettlement or transition to another site.

**Senior leaders** recognised that site staff had adopted more of a parent/carer role with children during the pandemic, and that there had been a clearer collective sense of purpose develop around this role (although some concern that this would roll back with larger residential groups). This shift was seen positively by senior leaders as in line with broader staff development and culture reform aims. There was some hope that the pandemic had highlighted the peculiarity of the children’s secure estate within HMPPS, with the voice of the YCS now being heard more.

**External stakeholders** were clear that YCS and the children’s secure estate had done well in terms of children staying well, safer, and with better relationships with staff. However, there was a frustration that it had not yet led to more innovation and reform in working with children (particularly using technology). There was concern that the pandemic had affected the ability to hold resettlement planning meetings for children and disrupted the development of reforms to introduce more effective personal casework support in line with Constructive Resettlement.

External stakeholders welcomed how the pandemic, and particularly the move to smaller ‘family’ groups, had led to staff finding themselves in more of a parenting role in line with the need for a workforce focused on childcare. Related, external stakeholders supported the development of the YCS during and beyond the pandemic to be more child-centred or Child First, and to develop its voice and identity to ensure the specific needs of children were met.

## 8. CoRE messages for ‘building back better’

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In exploring the experiences of children and staff across the secure estate during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, this report has documented numerous findings about what was challenging, responses to it, how those involved coped, what went well and what could have done differently. It also shows which factors were the most important in predicting how children and staff experienced the various aspects of the pandemic and its restrictions. This is useful learning in helping to inform both how to address living with the continued presence of the pandemic, and how to meet other exceptional crises in the future.

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Moreover, the CoRE programme was designed specifically to produce lessons that would help inform how to 'build back better' in order to improve the experiences of living and working to deliver services for children in custody in more usual circumstances. Many of these lessons have been highlighted at the end of each chapter in this report, in the form of questions for senior leaders to consider 'how' to address. However, there are four CoRE messages for future operations that are so pervasive or fundamental to experiences that they are highlighted here, together with associated recommendations.

## 1) Being in smaller 'family' groups (of single figures) can help children feel safer (and bring other benefits), particularly in YOI cultures.

Children felt safer from others' harm during the pandemic than before, at least in YOIs and STCs where pre-COVID comparisons exist. The obvious conclusion might have been that this is simply because children were locked-down more in their rooms away from any interactions. However, time spent in or out of rooms was not a significant predictor of feeling safe/unsafe. More important was whether children felt victimised by someone and the quality of relationships (with other children and staff) - improvements in these was the key. The most consistently dominant narrative from children and staff (and others) in relation to improvements in both victimisation and relationships was the same: the reorganisation of children into smaller 'family' groups, introduced as 'bubbles' to reduce the risk of transmission. In YOIs, this reduced the typical size of group children were associating with from dozens to single figures.

In relation to victimisation and conflict, children and staff discussed how children were no longer hypervigilant to where a violent provocation might be coming from next, reducing tensions and the risk of incident. Smaller groups helped relationships with other children by allowing them to interact more, become closer and increased understanding, also reducing the risk of bullying. Similarly, smaller groups helped relationships with staff by allowing more time and space to get to know each other as individuals, and adopt more caring roles (and feel cared for).

There were other benefits from children being in the small single-figure family groups. Staff felt that it allowed them to work with children more constructively while in the residences, and engage better with activities and with education in the classroom.

It should be noted that there was some evidence that children would become frustrated and misbehave if they felt "stuck" in the 'wrong' small group, suggesting a need to find a way to allow children some agency when arranging groups.

Senior leaders and external stakeholders recognised that the design of YOIs as large-capacity wings and current staff numbers meant that there was a limit to how many small groups could be out of rooms at any one time, producing a tension with the aim for children to be out of their rooms for longer. Solutions will need to be found to accommodate both.

**Recommendation1: YCS to consider whether small 'family' groups can work logistically and safely post-pandemic or, alternatively, how the conditions needed to retain their benefits can be replicated.**

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## 2) Positive child experiences in custody require constructive relationships with staff, based on a childcare role

Interactions with staff were crucial to children's experiences than peer relations – even more so than relations with other children. For instance, how safe children felt depended more strongly on whether they felt victimised by staff than feeling victimised by other children. Having positive and supportive relationships with staff was a predictive factor for positive experiences across the domains considered, including how easy or difficult children found the lockdown period, whether they felt able to report victimisation from peers or staff, and their confidence in the complaints system. Conversely, staff experiencing positive relationships with children was the strongest predictor of the staff member feeling safe from others' harm at work.

One particular aspect of children's relationships with staff played a consistently important role in children's experience – positive behaviour reinforcement, such as telling a child when they have behaved well or saying that they were proud of something the child had done. This was very prominent in children's narratives about their improved behaviour. It was also found to be a significant predictor for whether children made a special effort to avoid trouble at this time, if they felt more able to seek help with a problem, and if they experienced personal growth during lockdown.

Increased positive behaviour reinforcement was a feature of the lockdown period in YOIs, with double the proportion of children in YOIs experiencing compared with before. This may be because of the move away from the formal Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme and adjudications. Certainly, external stakeholders concurred that child-staff relationships had benefitted from this shift in behaviour management style.

This shift is indicative of a movement towards a more (positive) parenting/carer style of relationship that developed between staff and children on site during the lockdown period. Three-quarters of staff working with children felt that they provided a parent/carer role during this time, with almost half of those doing so more than usual. It involves seeing the job as more one of childcare than disciplinarian or prison officer. Given the importance of the child-staff relationship described above, it is critical to note that the only significant predictor for staff experiencing a positive relationship with children was if they engaged with this childcare role, enjoying helping the children with their development.

Staff also discussed how their improved relationship and mutual understanding had involved them taking on more of a parent/carer role. Indeed, senior leaders considered that this increasing role of parent/carer for staff had developed a clearer sense of purpose during the pandemic. This shift was seen as positive and in line with broader staff development and culture aims. External stakeholders also welcomed this shift as in line with the need for a workforce focused on childcare and a YCS guided by the youth justice system's Child First principle.

However, residential staff are currently not fulfilling all the roles that parents/carers would be doing if the child were living in the community. For instance, only half of children received any encouragement from staff to engage with education (lower in YOIs than before lockdown), and only a minority received help from staff with education outside the classroom. When



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encouragement and support was noted, it tended to be from education professionals coming onto residential units rather than their residential staff.

It is also worth noting that this shift to more of a parent/carer role was not welcomed by all staff in YOIs, with some feeling disempowered from being more traditional “prison officers”.

**Recommendation 2: YCS to ensure recruitment, training and ongoing professional development enables and motivates staff working directly with children to fulfil a ‘parent/carer’ role.**

## 3) Children benefit from the opportunity, space, and support to develop learning informally that is more relevant to their personal growth.

The strongest predictor for developing pro-social identity, important to successful resettlement, was the child preparing for release by having learned a new skill or knowledge. Just under half of children considered that, during COVID-19, they had learned any knowledge or skills that would help them when released. The limited operating regimes in sites during the early months of the pandemic (particularly in YOIs and STCs) saw children learn new skills and knowledge informally, often proactively developing in their rooms.

Importantly, if children felt that activities that they were doing in their room were relevant to their development, they were more likely to be satisfied that they had enough stimulation. Similarly, parents/carers noted the new and unexpected interests developed by children from having in their rooms because of the restricted regime. This contrasted with that the frustration from parents that any formal activities outside of rooms at this time tended not to be meaningful or relevant to the child’s particular needs.

In relation to education specifically, although external stakeholders praised efforts to provide room education and activities, they similarly felt these were not constructively aligned with children’s individual interests and plans. Parents were also concerned with limited and formal inappropriate education during lockdown, but they felt that the less formal structure allowed children to focus on studies more relevant to their interests and plans for the future.

Similarly, staff voiced that children preferred and benefited from a reduced formal regime, but with more informal interactions to support children’s development and interests. This related to a theme from both senior leaders and external stakeholders that it was better to have children out for relatively less time if spent constructively on plans and activities relevant to them. These experiences of children and reflections of parents, senior leaders and external stakeholders point towards the need to ensure both more time for children to develop their interests informally, and that all activities within the formal regime, including education, need to be aligned with the child’s individual developmental journey and constructive casework plan.

However, providing children with more opportunities to use their time constructively to develop skills and knowledge relevant to them would need to involve staff beyond the classroom. During the pandemic, only a small majority of children felt staff had encouraged them to engage with education, work, or training, and only a minority experienced help from staff outside of classes.



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Such wider staff engagement is important to fulfilling the expectations of a parent/carer role (described above) in fostering a child's development.

**Recommendation 3: YCS to provide all children with opportunities for development of skills and knowledge aligned to individual needs and interests via a constructive plan which includes supported learning beyond the classroom.**

## 4) Prioritising the needs of children in decision-making is an important challenge for policymakers

There was a strong theme from senior leaders and across different types of stakeholders that organisational arrangements for managing the secure estate during the pandemic limited the YCS' and sites' ability to meet the specific needs of children.

Between the start of the pandemic and the beginning of August, only about half of children in custody had any access to classroom-based education. Senior leaders and stakeholders were frustrated that classroom education was not available sooner in YOIs, contrasted to SCHs and vulnerable children in the community. Furthermore, both senior leaders and external stakeholders recognised that the suspension of classroom education made it difficult logistically to meet children's needs by operating a full regime and have children out of their rooms for adequate periods. There was a firm consensus from almost all external stakeholders and senior leaders that this delay to restarting classroom education was driven by prioritising the needs of the adult estate (and adult staff in the children's estate) rather than children's needs.

Relatedly, there was a clear theme across senior leaders and stakeholders that the position of YCS within HMPPS had restricted its flexibility to sufficiently support the needs of children during the pandemic. For instance, although external stakeholders praised the development of video calls in YOIs and STCs, the argument was made that its delay into Summer 2020 illustrated the lack of HMPPS dexterity for meeting children's specific needs in a timely manner.

Staff, senior leaders, and external stakeholders also widely saw the incorporation of the children's secure estate into the HMPPS Gold Command structure as restricting its ability to meet children's specific needs, with senior leaders having similar concerns around the EDM process planning the easing of restrictions.

Similarly, external stakeholders saw the failure of the Ministry of Justice's early release scheme to allow children home as an example of children suffering from adult-focused policymaking.

All of the above implies that, during the early months of the pandemic, children's specific needs and best interests were not always prioritised in decision making affecting the children's secure estate as legally required.

However, senior leaders hoped that the pandemic had highlighted the peculiarity of the children's estate within HMPPS, with the voice of the YCS now being heard more. External stakeholders similarly supported the YCS to develop its voice and identity to ensure that the specific needs of children were met.

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**Recommendation 4: HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice to review how YCS can fulfil its duties to prioritise the specific needs and best interests of children whilst in its current organisational position.**

## Annex A: CoRE Programme Methodology

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### Children's experiences

#### About the Child Survey

The Child Survey was a census collating the experiences of children living in the youth secure estate in England and Wales during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected through phone/video/face-to-face interviews (34 mins average) in the three weeks between 22 July and 12 August 2020.

- Researchers interviewed 391 children (67% of eligible children responded) across the three types of custodial site: Young Offender Institution's (YOI: 80%, n312), Secure Training Centres (STC: 14%, n54) and Secure Children's Homes (SCH: 6%, n25), in proportions closely reflecting the total youth custody population in July 2020.
- The proportion of females surveyed (1%, n5) was slightly less than in the custodial population (3%). Within the CoRE survey population (N=391), there weren't any children aged 13 or under, but there were a small minority who were aged 14 (n2, 1%) or 15 (n28, 7%) and almost a quarter who were 16 (n93, 24%).
- Just under half of children (n184, 47%) identified as White, just over one quarter as Black (n111, 28%), just over one in ten as (n52, 13%), and a twelfth as Asian (n33, 8%). A small number (n15, 4%) identified as being from another ethnic group and one preferred not to say (<1%).
- Again, closely reflecting the population, the legal basis for children's detention was: 34% (n133) remanded, 24% (n94) serving a Detention and Training Order, 26% (n100) held under section 90/91 and 16% (n64) held on another basis, including recall to custody. the majority had been residing in custody for 5 months or more by the time of survey (n248, 63%). Three in ten children had only resided in custody for 1-4 months (n177, 30%) and a smaller minority for less than one month (n24, 6%). Over half of children (n231, 59%) had never been to custody before this current period, whereas over two in ten children had been in custody once before (n87, 22%) and a smaller minority (n73, 19%) had experienced multiple periods in custody.

#### About the Child Qualitative Interviews

Of those children who consented to participate in follow-up qualitative research, a purposive sample of thirty-two children was selected to gather a cross-section of demographics and placements. All interviews were phone/face-to-face and conducted by researchers between October and November 2020. Children interviewed were accommodated across all three sectors: YOI (59%, n19), STC (19%, n6) and SCHs (22%, n7).

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- As per the general YCS population, the vast majority were male (n29, 91%), with a small number of female children (n2, 6%) female. Two-thirds of the sample were aged 17 (66%, n21); with a smaller number of 16-year-olds (n5, 16%), 18-year-olds (n3, 9%), 15-year-olds (n2, 6%) and one 14-year-old (n1, 3%). Just over a third of children (n11, 34%) identified as White, just under one third as Black (n10, 31%), around one in five as (n6, 19%), and around a sixth as Asian (n5, 16%).

## Quantitative analysis

To determine which factors were the strongest predictors of each dependent variable (DV), the quantitative analysis was completed in two stages:

- 1) Independent variables (IVs) from the child survey that were theorised as having a potential impact on the dependent variable were tested using **bivariate analysis**. Association was tested using Chi-square, and level of correlation tested using Phi and Cramer's-V.
- 2) IVs with significant association at the bivariate stage were entered into a **multivariate binary logistic regression** model to test (a) whether each IV was significant irrespective of the presence of the others (rather than just a side effect of another variable), and (b) the relative strength of effect of the IV on the DV.

Where bivariate analysis found large numbers of IVs associated with the DV, those significant variables were grouped into those of similar themes (e.g. those related to preparation for release), and one of the highest correlated IVs of each theme was entered into the regression model to represent that type of factor. This 'thematic quantitative analysis' is because variables that are too similar can knock each other out of the regression model. Looking for themes rather than entering lots of individual variables into regression models also helps to guard against the risk of false positives, and allows building of findings around collaborating patterns of variables which would be more reliable and useful for policymakers.

IVs that were only relevant to a smaller number of children relevant for the analysis (e.g. a variable relevant to only those experiencing the Reverse Cohorting Unit) were not included in the regression analysis. This is because regression models will only report on cases to whom all IVs were relevant, so would have resulted in large numbers of children being excluded.

All demographic variables (including age, gender, ethnicity and gender) were included within the bivariate analysis in this report.

The pre-COVID comparisons were taken from the most recent surveys before the pandemic in each of the YOIs and STCs undertaken by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP). Site and aggregate data were kindly provided by Catherine Shaw, Head of Research at HMIP, and her team. HMIP surveys are paper based self-completion questionnaires delivered and collected by HMIP staff, or interviews where necessary. Like the CoRE child survey, the HMIP surveys are a census of each institution rather than a sample, making results more reliable. Response rates in YOIs using this methodology are typically 80-90%. Statistically significant differences were established used Binomial tests.

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Only statistically significant results have been reported. In line with HMI Prisons surveys of children (and to allow for comparisons), the census data were not weighted (an exercise weighting to reflect the population showed no more than 1% difference in any topline descriptive frequency).

## Qualitative analysis

Analysis of qualitative data collected in depth interviews and from open questions in the survey were analysed in two stages:

- 1) A coding framework was created, based on the CoRE domains (e.g. Relationships and Culture) and subdomains (e.g. Staff-child relationships), and **each transcript was read for text relevant to each code**. Sections of text could be highlighted as relevant to more than one code. All text associated with each code was then outputted to a separate file.
- 2) The **output for each code was analysed thematically**. Following a process of familiarisation with the output files, a 'theme tree' was created wherein concepts emerging from the output file (with all relevant quotations) were organised into themes. Particular attention was paid to how those themes may be related, and whether some may be subsidiary themes helping to explain other broader themes.

Attention was also paid to any clear patterns in relation to whose output was relevant to which theme (e.g. whether outputs for any particular theme were only from those in Secure Training Centres).

## Staff experiences

### About the Staff Survey

The Staff Survey was a census collating the experiences of all staff from across youth custody services in England and Wales during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey collected the views and experiences of 1220 staff involved in the operation of the youth secure estate, both normally based in residential sites and organisation's headquarters (HQs). It included staff across Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), Secure Training Centres (STCs) and Secure Children's Homes (SCHs). Data were collected using an online questionnaire in the month between 17 July 2020 and 17 August 2020.

About half (48%) worked for YCS/HMPPS, with the remainder spread across Secure Training Centre (STC) providers (20%), local authorities (18%) and other service providers. 55% of respondents were usually based in YOIs, 19% based in Secure Children's Homes, 16% in STCs, and 10% in their organisations' central offices.

Of the 1220 staff responding to the survey, 63% (n770) usually worked with children, and 51% (n617) continued to work with children during the pandemic.

Half of staff (51%) had an operational role, and a third (32%) had line management responsibility. Two thirds of respondents (68%) have worked in youth justice for three years or more.

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Staff with Black and minority ethnicity accounted for 21% of respondents. 60% of respondents identified as female, and 40% as male.

## About the Staff Qualitative Interviews

Of those staff who consented to participate in follow-up qualitative research, a purposive sample of 20 staff was selected to gather a cross-section of demographics and placements. All interviews were phone/face-to-face and conducted by researchers during September 2020.

Staff interviewed worked across headquarters and sites: HQs (30%, n6); YOI (35%, n7), STC (15%, n3) and SCHs (20%, n4). About two-thirds of staff interviewed (65%, n13) worked for YCS/HMPPS, with the remainder from local authorities (20%, n4), STC provides (10%, n2) and an education provider (5%, n1).

There was a wide range of roles represented, including administrators, trainers, residential workers, teachers, healthcare workers, safeguarding, and monitoring. Half of the staff (n10) worked directly with children. Seven (35%) staff had management responsibility where they worked.

Five of the twenty members of staff had worked from home since the start of the pandemic (4 from HQ, 1 from STC). Four staff had been forced to isolate at some point (2 from YOIs, 1 from STC, 1 from SCH)

Two-thirds of staff interviewed qualitatively identified as female (65%, n13), and a third as male (35%, n7). Just under a third of staff (30%, n6) were of Black and minority ethnicity. The age ranges of staff interviewed was: 5% aged under 25 years old (n1); 25% aged 25-34 years old (n5); 30% aged 35-44 years old (n6); 30% aged 45-54 years old (n6); and 10% aged over 55 years old (n2).

## Quantitative analysis

To determine which factors were the strongest predictors of each dependent variable (DV), the quantitative analysis was completed in two stages:

- 1) Independent variables (IVs) from the child survey that were theorised as having a potential impact on the dependent variable were tested using **bivariate analysis**. Association was tested using Chi-square, and level of correlation tested using Phi and Cramer's-V.
- 2) IVs with significant association at the bivariate stage were entered into a **multivariate binary logistic regression** model to test (a) whether each IV was significant irrespective of the presence of the others (rather than just a side effect of another variable), and (b) the relative strength of effect of the IV on the DV.

Where bivariate analysis found large numbers of IVs associated with the DV, those significant variables were grouped into those of similar themes (e.g. those related to preparation for release), and one of the highest correlated IVs of each theme was entered into the regression model to represent that type of factor. This 'thematic quantitative analysis' is because variables

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that are too similar can knock each other out of the regression model. Looking for themes rather than entering lots of individual variables into regression models also helps to guard against the risk of false positives, and allows building of findings around collaborating patterns of variables which would be more reliable and useful for policymakers.

IVs that were only relevant to a subsample (e.g. a variable relevant to only those working in a Reverse Cohorting Unit) were not included in the regression analysis. This is because regression models will only report on cases to whom all IVs were relevant, so would have resulted in large numbers of staff being excluded.

All demographic variables (including age, ethnicity and gender) were included within the bivariate analysis in this report.

Only statistically significant results have been reported.

## Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data collected in depth interviews and from open questions in the survey were analysed in two stages:

- 1) A coding framework was created, based on the CoRE domains (e.g. Relationships and Culture) and subdomains (e.g. Staff-child relationships), and **each transcript and questionnaire text-box was read for text relevant to each code**. Sections of text could be highlighted as relevant to more than one code. All text associated with each code was then outputted to a separate file.
- 2) The **output for each code was analysed thematically**. Following a process of familiarisation with the output files, a 'theme tree' was created wherein concepts emerging from the output file (with all relevant quotations) were organised into themes. Particular attention was paid to how those themes may be related, and whether some may be subsidiary themes helping to explain other broader themes.

Attention was also paid to any clear patterns in relation to whose output was relevant to which theme (e.g. whether outputs for any particular theme were only from those in Secure Training Centres or from key demographic groups).

## Parent and carer reflections

Researchers interviewed 16 parents and carers of 15 children in England and Wales. The interviews were conducted between September and November 2020. This included parents and carers of children from across Young Offender Institutions (40%, n6), Secure Training Centres (40%, n6) and Secure Children's Homes (20%, n3).

Of the 71 children's names identified, sites did not respond to requests for contact details in 34 cases (48%). Of the parent and carers of 37 children contacted (52%), the response rate was 41% (n15). Four parents declined to take part (11%), and a further 18 (53) were not proceeded with. Reasons for not proceeding with an interview included; no answer when called, not having access to an interpreter, or it not being an appropriate time due to personal reasons such as a family bereavements, health issues.



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Participants included mothers (62%, n10), fathers (19%, n=3), grandmothers (13%, n2) and a male, social worker holding parental responsibility (6%, n1), as identified on the child's prison record.

The proportion of girls' parents interviewed (13%, n2) was less than that of boys' parents (87%, n13), which is reflective of the difference in the populations in custody. Two thirds of children were aged 16 years and above (60%, n9) with smaller numbers for under 16 (40%, n6).

## Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data collected in depth interviews were analysed in two stages:

- 1) A coding framework was created, based on the CoRE domains (e.g. Relationships and Culture) and subdomains (e.g. Staff-child relationships), and each transcript was read for text relevant to each code. Sections of text could be highlighted as relevant to more than one code. All text associated with each code was then outputted to a separate file.
- 2) The **output for each code was analysed thematically**. Following a process of familiarisation with the output files, a 'theme tree' was created wherein concepts emerging from the output file (with all relevant quotations) were organised into themes. Particular attention was paid to how those themes may be related, and whether some may be subsidiary themes helping to explain other broader themes.

Attention was also paid to any clear patterns in relation to whose output was relevant to which theme (e.g. whether outputs for any particular theme were only from parents of those in Secure Training Centres or from key demographic groups).

## Senior leaders' reflections

### About the Senior Leaders' Interviews

Researchers interviewed 18 senior leaders directly involved in running the children's secure estate across England and Wales. This included a purposive sample of YCS senior leadership team (33%, n6), Governors of YOIs (33%, n6, including one Deputy Governor), STC Directors (11%, n2), and SCH managers (22%).

Depth interviews were conducted by phone/video between October and December 2020.

In total, 23 senior leaders were invited to participate. Of the five that were not interviewed, 1 declined (SCH manager), 1 did not join the arranged call (SCH manager), and three did not respond to requests (2 SCH managers and 1 YCS senior leadership team).

## Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data collected in the depth interviews were analysed using framework analysis, which involved three stages:

- 1) A coding framework was created, based on the CoRE domains (e.g. Relationships and Culture) and subdomains (e.g. Staff-child relationships), and each transcript was read and marked for text relevant to each code. Sections of text could be highlighted as

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relevant to more than one code. All text associated with each code was then outputted to a separate file.

- 2) For each domain, a spreadsheet is created with a column for each sub-domain, and a row for each participant. Observations from the outputs were described in the relevant spreadsheet cell, including key illustrative quotations.
- 3) Each column is analysed thematically to consider compare and contrast perceptions across different cases or groups. The analysis allowed for patterns across leaders of the same type (e.g. from YCS headquarters, YOI Governors), and between different types.

## External stakeholders' reflections

### About the External Stakeholders' interviews

Researchers interviewed representatives of 15 stakeholder organisations relevant to the children's secure estate across England and Wales. This included a purposive sample of public sector service providers (n3), third sector service providers (n5), statutory governance bodies (including arms-length and governmental) (n5), and representative organisations of secure estate staff and associated staff (n2). HMPPS (when not specifically the YCS) was considered as a public sector provider.

In-depth interviews were conducted by phone/video between October and December 2020.

In total, 20 external stakeholder organisations were invited to participate. Of the five that were not interviewed, 1 declined and 4 did not respond to requests.

### Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data collected in the depth interviews were analysed using framework analysis, which involved three stages:

- 1) A coding framework was created, based on the CoRE domains (e.g. Relationships and Culture) and subdomains (e.g. Staff-child relationships), and each transcript was read and marked for text relevant to each code. Sections of text could be highlighted as relevant to more than one code. All text associated with each code was then outputted to a separate file.
- 2) For each domain, a spreadsheet is created with a column for each sub-domain, and a row for each participant. Observations from the outputs were described in the relevant spreadsheet cell, including key illustrative quotations.
- 3) Each column is analysed thematically to consider compare and contrast perceptions across different cases or groups. The analysis allowed for patterns across organisations of the same type, and between different types of stakeholder.