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Chair, Youth Justice Board

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## **ANNUAL STRATEGIC STEER FOR THE YOUTH JUSTICE BOARD**

Thank you for the opportunity to join the discussion at your Board meeting last month. As promised, I am writing to give a 'strategic steer' for the Board in its important work for the year ahead.

Encouraging progress has been made over the last twelve years. Since 2012, the number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system has fallen 78% and the number of children held in custody has fallen 77%. The year ending March 2022 saw the fourth consecutive year-on-year decrease in the number of knife or offensive weapons offences resulting in a caution or sentence. But there is much further to go. The latest youth justice statistics from the year ending March 2022 saw an increase in rates in all types of behavioural incidents in custody, including a rise in assaults and self-harm. Across the youth justice system there remains over-representation of children from ethnic minorities, and we must strive to eliminate racial biases. The victims of crimes committed by children are often other children. We owe it to all children and their communities to enable them to grow up free from the fear of violence or exploitation.

Our common objectives in the Youth Justice System are broadly three:

- To reduce crime committed by children;
- To ensure that those children who enter the justice system are kept safe, and treated fairly and with care, always remembering they are still children; and
- To prevent child offenders becoming adult offenders.

Many parts of the public sector, and wider society, play a part in this mission, alongside policing, the courts, the secure estate, and the oversight and monitoring provided by HMIP, Ofsted and the CQC. 'Upstream', a vital role is played by schools and colleges, including Alternative Provision settings; Children's Social Care; CAMHS; local authorities; and others. I will continue to work with colleagues across government to ensure we are joined-up in our approach.

The Youth Justice Board's unique role is concerned with those children who are already in, on the periphery of, or at high risk of entering, the Youth Justice System, and those leaving it. Outside the secure estate, the key specialist frontline interaction with these young people is through Youth Offending Teams, and it is here that I would like the YJB to focus sharply.

We need to ensure that YOTs are operating as effectively as possible in pursuit of the three objectives above. We need differences in performance to be understood and for good practice to be spread such that all YOTs move towards the performance of the best. Thank you for all your work to support the MoJ's development of key performance indicators (KPIs) for YOTs; I am keen that the YJB now produce, as soon as possible, a single clear performance framework. That should include clarity around how KPIs and other sources will be used to monitor performance; and the triggers for 'intervention' where necessary because of poor performance, and what form(s) this can take.

With the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) now established as the repository of evidence for 'what works' in terms of interventions with young people, the YJB has an important role in ensuring that YOTs are following this evidence-based approach and recommending to the MoJ where other parts of government and the public sector need to be engaged in this too.

In any event, we know that participation in education is a key factor in improving the range of outcomes for young people, and lower educational attainment is a highly prevalent feature among adult offenders. I would like the YJB to ensure YOTs consistently have attendance in education as an integral part of their approach with young people.

The Turnaround programme is a key new programme to engage and divert youngsters on the cusp of the youth justice system. The YJB, as part of its role on the Programme Board, should monitor its deployment in the YOTs, and the effectiveness, and value, derived from this programme. As you know, my officials are working with the National Police Chiefs' Council to improve our understanding about the use and effectiveness of Out of Court Disposals; I would be grateful for your support on this work.

While early intervention and diversion are critical, for those children who do go into custody we must further address the rate of re-offending, which remains the highest across the criminal justice system. Once again, YOTs' role is central. They should be working with the Youth Custody Service to ensure every child has a clear plan ahead of their release and can access the right education, healthcare and accommodation support. I am conscious that, because of the small numbers of child custody-leavers in any individual local authority, this is an area in which it is difficult to build up experience, so there is an even greater role for the YJB in setting out good practice.

I appreciate that there may be other related areas that you may wish to look at, and I will be grateful to receive insights from you, but none should come at the expense of capacity to drive YOT performance.

Like all arms-length bodies, the YJB is subject to regular review of performance as part of the government's Public Bodies Reform Programme, review of whether functions continue to be required, and if so, which body – government or otherwise – is best placed to deliver them. This year presents an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of the YJB and impact through the YOTs.

The YJB's final budget for 2023/4 is subject to the ongoing internal allocations process. With great pressures on public finances, it is even more important we maximise efficiency and value in everything we do, and my officials will work with you on this.

I look forward to seeing the completed YJB Strategic Plan, and to our quarterly update discussions of progress.

I am copying this to Felicity Buchan MP (Minister for Housing and Homelessness), Claire Coutinho MP (Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing), Chris Philip MP (Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire), Jane Hutt MS (Minister for Social Justice), the other members of the YJB Board, and Claudia Sturt (Chief Executive). I will publish this letter on gov.uk.

**Damian Hinds**  
**Minister for Prisons and Probation**