



Applying the Child First Framework in Youth Justice Services

Research by Crest Advisory

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About Crest Advisory

We are crime and justice specialists - equal parts research, strategy and communication. From police forces to public inquiries, from tech companies to devolved authorities, we believe all these organisations (and more) have their own part to play in building a safer, more secure society. As the UK's only consultancy with this focus, we are as much of a blend as the crime and justice sector itself.

About the Youth Justice Board

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Ministry of Justice, that is responsible for overseeing the youth justice system in England and Wales. This report was commissioned by the YJB.

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Executive summary

Crest Advisory was commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) to explore the application of the Child First framework across youth justice services in England and Wales. This mixed-methods research is part of the operationalising Child First project, and aimed to improve understanding of how the Child First framework is currently being understood and applied in decision making across youth justice services, including the use of YJB materials and the barriers and enablers to implementation. Our primary research involved direct engagement with practitioners and children supported by youth justice services via surveys, and a deep dive with two youth justice services to explore the application of the Child First framework in practice, through focus groups and workshops. Based on our findings, this report makes a series of recommendations to help the YJB to better support services in implementing the Child First framework and deliver an improved service.

Child First is the guiding principle of the youth justice system in England and Wales. It means seeing children as children, focusing on their rights, needs and potential, and diverting them from the justice system. The Child First framework ([YJB, 2022](#)) is a tool created to help professionals make good decisions using the evidence on what works best for children in the justice system to improve outcomes, prevent offending and achieve safer communities with fewer victims.

This report explores how the four tenets of the Child First framework are applied by youth justice services and experienced by children, identifying: areas of challenge and opportunity; how the Child First framework is communicated and embedded at a local level; the impact of guidance and training; and how the Child First framework is implemented with partners.

Our research findings demonstrate significant awareness and understanding of the Child First decision-making framework among youth justice service practitioners, as well as **high levels of confidence in the application of the four tenets**, particularly in out-of-court and community settings. Insight from children supported by youth justice services echoes this, with a majority of children reporting feeling supported, understood and listened to by adults at the youth justice service, with opportunities to be involved in planning and kept informed of decisions that affect them.



Our research with children identified the following key findings about how the four tenets of the Child First framework are experienced by children supported by youth justice services:

1. **‘As children’:** Children had positive experiences with youth justice services and felt that their experiences and capabilities were recognised
2. **‘Building pro-social identity’:** Children felt supported to develop skills and make positive progress. However, fewer children felt part of their community
3. **‘Collaboration with children’:** Children felt involved in planning their time at the youth justice service and included in decisions about them, with more opportunities for collaboration at a strategic level
4. **‘Diverting from stigma’:** Children felt supported to plan for their future, and most did not feel judged by practitioners

We triangulated feedback from children with insight shared by youth justice practitioners on how the Child First tenets are applied, and **have identified a series of recommendations for the YJB to support youth justice services to build on good practice.** These recommendations include:

- **The YJB should continue to identify and disseminate good practice online around the application of the Child First tenets**, including via the Resource Hub, YJ Bulletin and social media, to support youth justice services to understand how to apply the tenets in context, and as shareable resources to improve parental understanding of interventions to boost confidence and engagement. **See recommendations 1, 2 and 5.**
- **The YJB should disseminate information to practitioners reflecting our research finding that the proportion of children who report feeling part of their community is not as high as the proportion who report positively about other protective factors.** YJB guidance for Management Boards should cover the need to involve other agencies who may be better positioned to foster a sense of community (e.g. sports or arts clubs). **See recommendation 3.**
- To strengthen collaboration with children and provide clarity on how their feedback has been acted upon, **the YJB should encourage services to continue to seek feedback from children regularly, and use a child-friendly ‘you said, we did’ template to reflect back to children where their feedback has shaped the service delivery.** **See recommendation 4.**
- In response to our survey findings that around a fifth of children express uncertainty or lack of planning for their future, **youth justice services should review how the children they support are engaged in conversations about future planning** to understand how children’s perceptions might be influenced by external factors or concerns, such as limited access to education or employment opportunities, and how practitioners and partners might provide additional support. **See recommendation 6.**



Based on our engagement with youth justice service practitioners via survey and focus groups, we identified the **following key findings about how the Child First framework is embedded across youth justice services**, and how guidance and training supports the application of the framework:

- **Embedding the Child First Framework:** Practitioners showed high levels of awareness of the Child First framework, and most practitioners embraced the framework as reinforcing what they already do well. However, some practitioners need more reassurance and clarity about the framework - for example, understanding how the Child First framework coexists with risk management.
- **Guidance and training:** Frontline practitioners and managers' use of guidance materials varied. Practitioners prefer easily digestible materials and sources of information. Practitioners found discussion-based training most effective to explore the application of the Child First framework.

Based on these findings, our report makes a **series of recommendations to the YJB to consolidate youth justice practitioners' awareness of the Child First framework** through sharing tangible examples of good practice and providing clarity on the application of the framework. These include:

- **The YJB should review Resource Hub submissions and practice examples** to ensure that they reflect what the application of the Child First tenets 'looks like' across different settings and capture more challenging contexts to support practitioners managing these situations. Case studies from the YJB's Child First Pathfinders are an important opportunity for the YJB to

show how existing programs or interventions across youth justice services apply the Child First tenets. **See recommendations 7, 9 and 10.**

- To consolidate practitioners' understanding of Child First as an evidence-based practice framework that incorporates other approaches (e.g. trauma informed and restorative approaches), **the YJB should continue to share practical resources to demonstrate how the Child First framework is aligned with other, more familiar ways of working. See recommendation 8.**
- To support practitioners to better absorb information and integrate learning into their routines more effectively, **the YJB should continue to ensure that resources shared with services are in diverse formats** - including podcasts and visual content. **See recommendation 11.**
- To avoid confusion and overwhelm, **the YJB should collate information and messaging to services on the Child First framework and provide clear steers on how services can prioritise information. To support this, the YJB can leverage the knowledge and experience of managers** to ensure that materials meet the needs of staff and to incorporate feedback on the best format, frequency and focus of information. **See recommendations 12 and 13.**
- Further training was welcomed by practitioners, with discussion-based sessions preferred by most practitioners. Given the cost and travel limitations associated with in-person training, **services should consider holding discussion-based sessions to review guidance and information on the Child First framework** to give practitioners the space and opportunity to ask questions, share experiences and feel confident in the application of the framework. **See recommendation 14.**



Additionally, **our research considered the role that partnerships play in applying the Child First framework.** We found that strong relationships with partners have the potential to drive a more cohesive approach, aligned to the Child First decision-making framework. However, differences in approach, language and strategic priorities across partners have acted as a barrier to implementation.

We identified several opportunities for the YJB to support work to strengthen partnerships, and build on the positive steps taken by many Youth Justice Services to engage key partners and bridge the gap in understanding around the positive outcomes associated with the Child First framework. Our recommendations include

- **The YJB has an important role to play in supporting services to demonstrate the broad alignment of the Child First framework with partners' own strategic priorities.** For example, the YJB could circulate resources that can be shared with partners demonstrating the application of the Child First tenets in different contexts – including at court, secure settings and police custody – as part of a conversation about how to work together to get better outcomes for children, victims and the community. **See recommendation 15.**
- **The YJB should build on the successful roll out of the Child First self-assessment toolkit to bring partners together to reflect on common themes and gaps in how they currently understand and apply the Child First framework** and collaboratively identify solutions. **See recommendation 16.**
- **At a strategic level, the YJB should continue to meet with national and regional representatives of key partner agencies** to consolidate and

reinforce the positive conversations happening between partners on the ground. The YJB has already taken positive steps in this direction - for example, through the development of an internal Child First Policing Position Statement to direct engagement with policing partners, as well as direct involvement in informing Child First Policing guidance developed by The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC). These actions demonstrate how strategic alignment can help embed the Child First tenets across the youth justice system and partner agencies. **See recommendation 17.**



Finally, we identified areas for further research to continue to build the evidence base on the application of the Child First

framework, and strengthen the understanding of children and parents or carers' perspectives on the support provided by youth justice services as well as outcomes and effectiveness of diversion approaches.

In particular, the Youth Justice Board could support and / or commission further research to improve the evidence base on:

- Children's perspectives on what 'solving problems' means to them, and how this aligns with the type of support youth justice services are equipped to provide
- Parents and carers' perspectives on their children's engagement with youth justice services, including their understanding of the interventions in place and the perceived impact on both the child and the family.
- The impact of different diversion and out-of-courts work for children involved in the youth justice system and associated outcomes

Introduction

Scope of this research

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) has identified the Child First framework as the guiding principle for youth justice. Child First is an evidence-based framework for ‘what works best for children in trouble’; it is designed to help children achieve best outcomes and prevent offending, while also keeping communities safe ([YJB, 2024](#)).

The adoption of the framework has generated strong interest and growing engagement from youth justice services across England and Wales, reflecting a clear commitment to placing children’s strengths and needs at the forefront of youth justice. However, there remains limited evidence on how the Child First framework is being implemented in practice across youth justice services in England and Wales. In particular, more insight is needed to understand the challenges practitioners face, as well as the factors that support or hinder their efforts to apply the Child First tenets effectively.

The YJB has therefore commissioned Crest Advisory to carry out research with children who are supported by youth justice services, and youth justice practitioners who work with them, to better understand how the Child First framework is currently implemented across youth justice services. This research aims to explore how the tenets of Child First are understood and applied by services in day-to-day practice and to examine the key barriers and enablers that shape its implementation in England and Wales.

This research is an opportunity to bolster evidence on how the tenets are applied, adding to the growing body of literature on the Child First framework.

The report aims to provide practical recommendations to the YJB and other relevant

stakeholders, including youth justice services. These insights are intended to inform ongoing efforts to strengthen the support and direction provided by the YJB to youth justice services in relation to the implementation of the Child First framework.

Background

Evolution and development of the Child First evidence base and framework

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) has identified the Child First framework as the guiding principle for youth justice in their Strategic Plans for 2021–2024 ([YJB, 2021](#)) and 2024 - 2027 ([YJB, 2024](#)). The principle was first outlined by Haines and Drakeford ([1998](#)) in their book ‘Young People and Youth Justice’ where it is defined as a philosophy focused on diversion and minimum custody. The principle of ‘Child First’ was subsequently formalised in the Welsh Assembly Government and YJB’s ‘All Wales Youth Offending Strategy’ ([2004](#)), which set out a holistic approach to youth justice focused on prevention, and more fully detailed and evidenced by Case and Haines in their book ‘Positive Youth Justice: Children First Offenders Second’ ([2015](#)).

Subsequently, the Positive Youth Justice model was merged with the Constructive Resettlement model (see Bateman and Hazel) to form the original Child First tenets adopted by the YJB that ultimately shaped the YJB’s 2019 Strategic Plan ([YJB, 2019](#)). The introduction of Child First in the YJB’s 2019 - 2022 Strategic Plan ([YJB, 2019](#)), marked a shift away from the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) which prioritised professional assessments of risk over children’s own perspectives and lived experiences ([Bateman, 2020](#)), towards an evidence-based framework that focused on prioritising children’s individual needs, strengths, sense of community and past experiences. The framework is based on the evidence on what works best for children in the justice system to improve outcomes, prevent offending and achieve safer communities with fewer victims.

The Child First framework is underpinned by four tenets:

1. **Seeing children as children** by prioritising their needs, capacities and interests through developmentally informed work that acknowledges structural barriers children face and meets responsibilities towards children
2. **Building a pro-social identity** by recognising children's strengths and fostering positive relationships that empower them to contribute meaningfully to society
3. **Collaborating with children** by ensuring meaningful participation and engagement with both children and their parents or carers
4. **Diverting children from stigma** by minimising contact with the criminal justice system through prevention, diversion, and minimal intervention

The Youth Justice Board has produced documents and guidance (e.g. [A Guide to Child First](#)) **to support youth justice services to embed and apply the Child First decision-making framework.** This includes a self-assessment tool ([YJB, 2024](#)) to help youth justice services and partners reflect on how they are applying the Child First framework in their practice, and what steps they can take to improve practice within their service. Additionally, the YJB has set up Child First ‘pathfinder projects’, which include specific interventions, programmes and piloted approaches at several youth justice services to expand the evidence base on effective and innovative practice (YJB, [2022](#)). Evaluations of these pathfinder projects provide evidence on the challenges and enablers particular youth justice services have encountered when implementing the Child First framework, as well as important learnings on how challenges have been successfully mitigated. Case studies from these pathfinder projects are included in this report where relevant to provide additional, practical insight on implementation.

Child First evidence base

Since the adoption of Child First as a guiding principle in youth justice, **there has been ongoing research into how it is applied in practice and the positive impact it has had** on both children and practitioners (i.e. service providers) ([Case and Browning, 2021](#)). It is important to recognise that Child First operates as a framework of evidence-based practice, meaning that research typically focuses on different dimensions of its implementation. For example, evaluations of the YJB's Child First Pathfinders - referenced throughout this report - offer valuable insight into how youth justice services have implemented and reported on the application of the Child First tenets within their specific cohorts.

Despite evidence demonstrating the positive impact of the Child First evidence base, ([Case and Browning, 2021](#)), **some research suggests that youth justice services still face challenges to embedding the tenets at a service-level**. For instance, research conducted by Hampson (in [Case and Hazel, 2023](#)) found that some youth justice practitioners wanted greater clarity on how the Child First framework should be considered alongside risk management, given that some assessments still required practitioners to assess the risks children pose (Hampson in [Case and Hazel, 2023](#)). Similarly, evidence from Day (in [Case and Hazel, 2023](#)) revealed that 'risk culture' continued to dominate front-line practice, with resistance among some practitioners to move away from a risk-based approach towards the Child First framework. This echoes earlier findings from Day ([2022](#)) which indicate that practitioners are finding it hard to balance risk assessment and welfare-approaches and have a fear of 'getting it wrong' and being subject to professional scrutiny. This has particular implications in the context of serious violence involving children and associated levels of risk and further research is required to understand the specific application of the Child First framework in such contexts ([Case and Hazel, 2023](#)).

Additionally, research conducted by Hampson in 2023 (in [Case and Hazel, 2023](#)) found that youth justice practitioners had not, at that point in time, received specific training on the Child First framework since its adoption by the YJB. This gap in training was identified as an ‘extremely important’ factor in being able to fully implement the framework. Supporting this, Day ([2022](#)) recognises that a lack of adequate training, confusion about terminology, and investment in established forms of practice have been cited as possible reasons for the limited impact of changes to practice. In response, since 2023, the YJB has developed and shared several resources to support the implementation of the framework - including webinar events, podcasts and infographics (see Annex C). Examples include the ‘Child First Webinar: Examining Children’s Collaboration in the Youth Justice System’ ([YJB, 2024](#)), and the ‘Child First Framework in Practice podcast’ ([YJB, 2024](#)).

Literature ([Case, Browning, Hampson, 2023](#)) suggests that **partnership working** - including interactions and engagement with police, courts, social care services and education - **is essential to the implementation of the Child First decision-making framework** as part of a whole systems approach. Research by Case and Browning ([2021](#)) similarly highlights that the implementation of the Child First framework is dependent on the local context within which a youth justice service is operating, and is therefore impacted by relationships with local partner services and agencies. However, research has found that partnerships can present a challenge for practitioners when implementing the Child First framework, given the lack of knowledge, understanding and information regarding the framework and the need for youth justice practitioners to educate partners on the Child First tenets ([Case, Hampson and Nisbet, 2024](#), [Case, Browning, Hampson, 2023](#)). In 2024, the YJB published the Child First Self-Assessment Toolkit ([Youth Justice Board, 2024](#)) to support partner agencies in aligning their practice with the Child First evidence base.

Finally, evidence from Case, Hampson and Nisbet ([2024](#)) **criticised the lack of involvement of children in discussions around the Child First framework.**

Children's experiences have often been deprioritised 'within youth justice policy, practice and research' ([Case, Hampson, Nisbet, 2024](#)), given the strong focus on practitioners' perspectives. Recent research by Case, Hampson, Nisbet ([2024](#)) also suggested that children's ability to meaningfully engage and collaborate with services varied across different justice agencies; for instance, while collaboration with children in youth justice services was "generally positive", collaborative efforts from police, courts and children's social care services were found to be "mostly negative" throughout all stages of the youth justice system.

This research strengthens the current evidence base on the application of the Child First framework, building on the work of various scholars - including Case, Browning and Hampson's Strategy Implementation Project ([2024](#)) and Day's ([2022](#)) practitioner-focused work. Specifically, our research contributes new insight from children supported by youth justice services on how the Child First tenets are experienced, and our deep dives with youth justice services provide deeper evidence and insight on the application of the tenets in day-to-day practice.

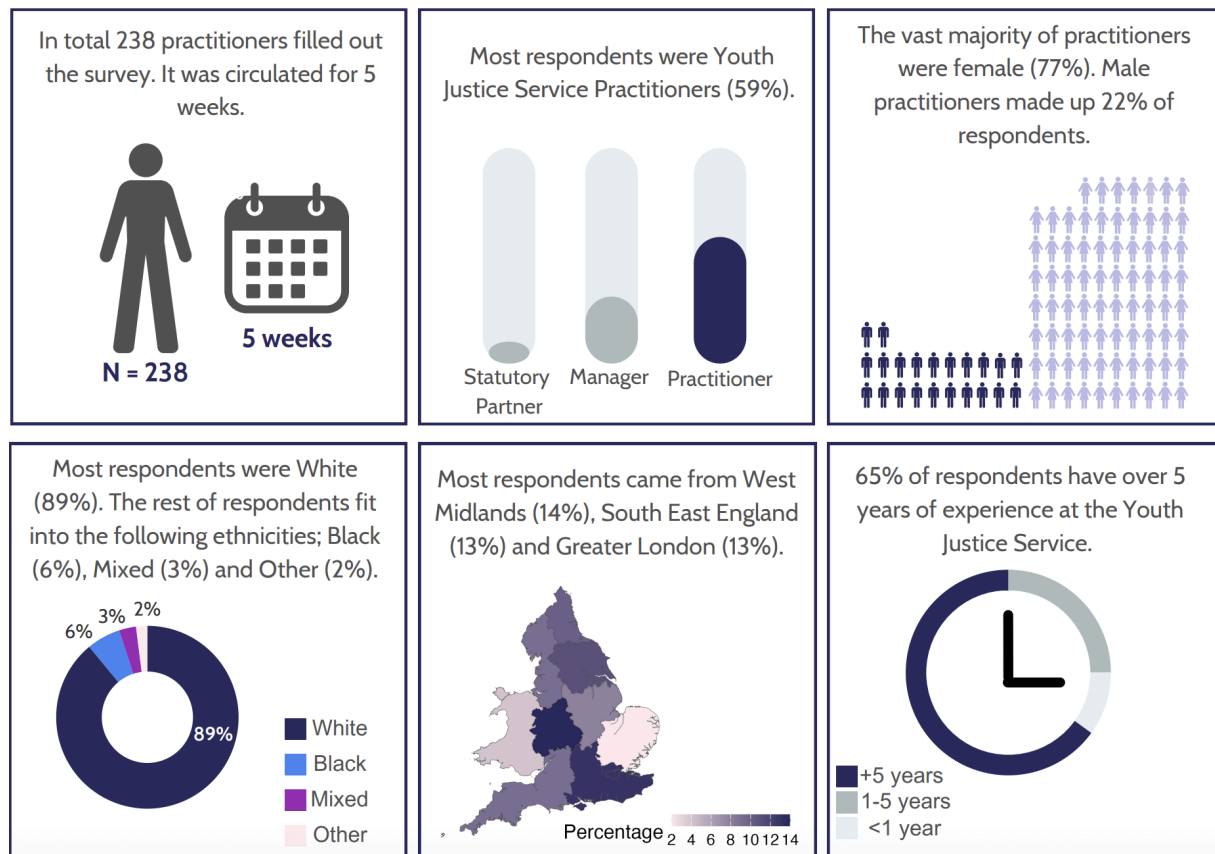
Our approach

We adopted a mixed methods approach to the research, combining both quantitative and qualitative data methods and analysis throughout three phases of work running from April 2024 to February 2025.

The first phase of the research (April to May 2024) centered around understanding the Child First landscape across England and Wales. We conducted an open source evidence review of research and literature on the topic of Child First (see [Bibliography](#)). The review included available evidence and evaluation of the Child First Pathfinders. Insight from the evidence review has informed the lines of enquiry for the following stages of primary research, as set out below.

The second phase of the research (May to October 2024) focused on the design, dissemination and descriptive analysis of quantitative surveys for practitioners (including managers and statutory partners) (Figure 1) and children (Figure 2) in youth justice services across England and Wales to understand their perceptions on the application of the Child First framework. These surveys were designed to firstly understand how the tenets of Child First were understood and applied across youth justice services (from both practitioners' and children's perspectives) and secondly (focusing on practitioner experiences) to explore potential barriers and enablers to implementing the Child First framework.

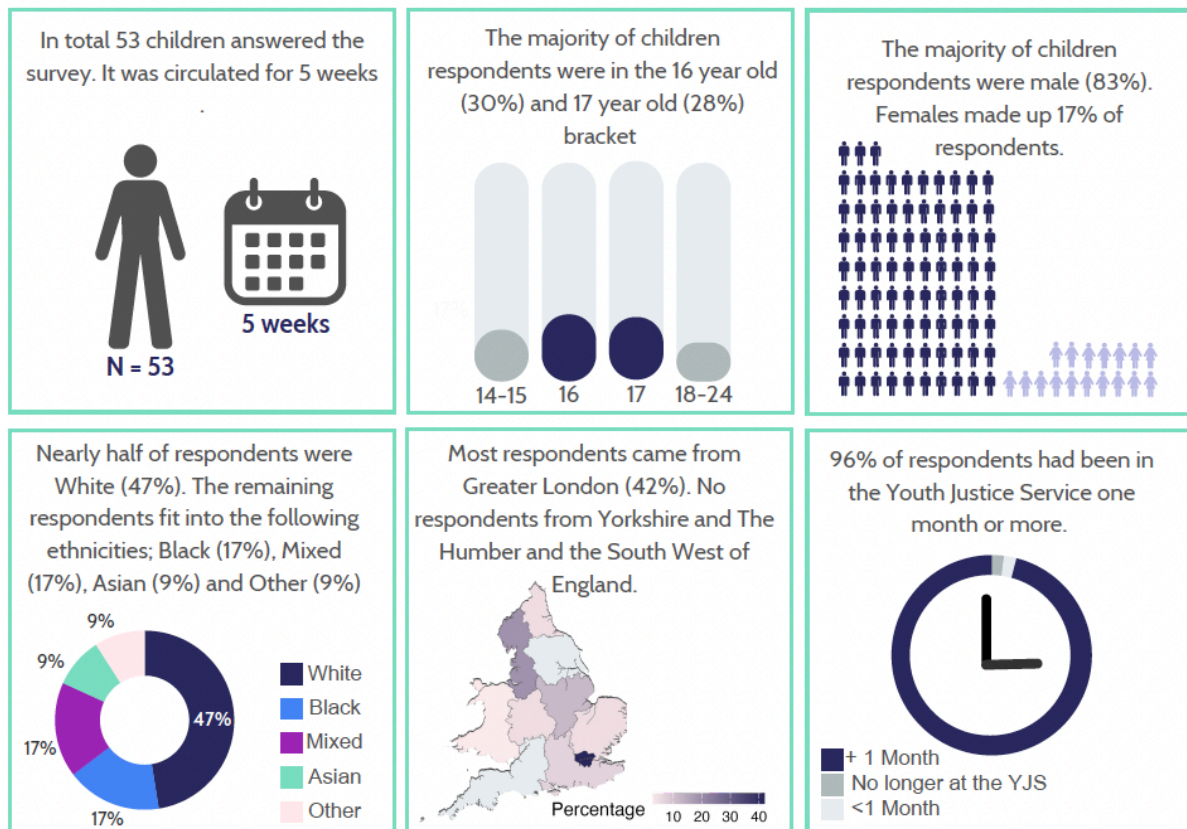
Figure 1: Overview of responses in the practitioners' survey



The survey for children who are currently being supported by youth justice services was designed to be accessible in both language and content, and was tested with youth engagement experts at the YJB. The questions in this survey did not explicitly use language aligned to the Child First tenets, but aimed to capture children's broader experiences and feelings within the youth justice system. Our descriptive analysis then mapped these findings to the different Child First tenets, allowing us to better understand how children's experiences align with the Child First framework and its tenets. The survey for children was also shared with young adults aged 18 to 24 who had previously been supported by youth justice services. We refer to this older cohort as children throughout the report to reflect that they were under the age of 18 at the time of their initial engagement with youth justice services. A high level overview can be

found below in Figure 2. For a detailed breakdown of survey responses, please see [Annex A](#).

Figure 2: Overview of responses in the children's survey



Data from both surveys was processed using R programming and Excel and analysed using descriptive analysis. It should be noted that, due to the small sample size (see [limitations](#)), our analysis combines responses from England and Wales and is not able to draw targeted findings per country.

In the third phase of the research (November 2024 to February 2025) we partnered with two youth justice services to conduct deep dives and gather further evidence on how the Child First framework is implemented in practice, focusing on the barriers and enablers faced by practitioners. Our two partner services were selected following an ‘expression of interest’ to services across England and Wales and subsequent meetings to assess to what extent services felt confident applying the Child First framework in practice, as well as their capacity to participate in the research. The two selected services both felt confident implementing the Child First framework, but acknowledged that barriers remained at their service. In partnering with youth justice services that were aware of barriers to implementing the Child First framework, our research aimed to gather helpful insight on the nature of these challenges and how services might be better supported to address them. Both services engaged via deep dives are in England; however, our selection ensured representation from both a rural and urban youth justice service.

Our qualitative engagement with the two youth justice services in England involved **interviews, focus groups and in-person workshops**. Table 1 provides an overview of this engagement, detailing the roles of participants and key focus areas for each engagement method. The qualitative engagement added depth to survey findings, allowing us to test survey results against practitioners’ experience. Workshops used interactive exercises to build on the themes explored during interviews and focus groups, and collaboratively review how challenges to implementation might be addressed. Interviews and focus groups were analysed using a combined inductive and deductive thematic approach to identify themes and insights emerging from the engagement.

Table 1: Overview of qualitative engagement with two youth justice services

Engagement Activity	Participants	Focus Areas
Interviews and focus groups (remote)	<p>18 practitioners from two youth justice services including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers • Intervention workers • Victim liaison officers • Youth outreach officers • Mental health nurses • Police and probation officers on secondment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness and understanding of the Child First tenets • Resources, guidance and training on the Child First framework • Implementation of the Child First framework across the different youth justice settings • Barriers and enablers to implementing the Child First framework
Workshops (in-person)	27 practitioners from two youth justice services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceptions and practical applications of the Child First framework • Addressing challenges to implementation • The Youth Justice Board's role in supporting the implementation of the Child First framework

This report **triangulates insight from our evidence review, quantitative surveys with children and youth justice service practitioners, and qualitative engagement with practitioners during our deep dive** to present findings on how the Child First framework is applied in youth justice services. These findings, and corresponding recommendations, are set out in the following section.

Ethical considerations

Our approach used non-random voluntary response sampling for both the children's survey and practitioners' survey, relying on youth justice services to disseminate the survey links. To promote awareness of the research and surveys, we hosted a webinar for youth justice service practitioners to explain the purpose of the research, and guidance how they could share the children's survey with children they support. This guidance for practitioners was developed in line with our ethical framework for engagement which reflects Government Social Research Guidance, and included advice on how to reduce bias in participation, promote accessibility, assess competency for children to participate and ensure informed consent. All engagement with practitioners and children, including via surveys, was underpinned by our ethical framework. This included accessible information sheets and privacy notices, optional survey questions, and all research materials made available in English, Welsh and paper formats.

Limitations

Due to the limited sample size of children and practitioners engaged via survey, the surveys for children and practitioners are not nationally representative. Consequently, survey findings are not generalisable to youth justice practitioners or children populations in England and Wales. While survey findings provide helpful insight which is triangulated in our research with qualitative data from focus groups and workshops, survey data should nonetheless be interpreted with caution. Similarly, as the deep dives in the third phase of research involved engagement with two youth justice services in England, the insight shared during focus groups and workshops is not generalisable across England and Wales.

Section 1: Understanding and applying the Child First tenets

Children's perspectives are important to understanding how effectively youth justice services are meeting their needs and enabling better outcomes. Our survey for children did not explicitly use terminology from the Child First framework (e.g. the four tenets), but instead **explored how children felt and experienced the support, processes, relationships, and interactions at their youth justice service**. The survey was designed to capture quantitative insight on their feelings, experiences and emotions while at the youth justice services, by asking children to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. The findings from the survey were analysed and mapped to specific Child First tenets, allowing us to understand how children's reported experiences align with the Child First framework and, by extension, give an indication of how effectively the Child First framework is implemented by services.¹

Alongside children's voices, we gathered insights from practitioners through **surveys, interviews, focus groups and workshops**. These findings offer a view into practitioners' understanding and awareness of the Child First tenets. This section brings together perspectives from both children and practitioners to explore how the Child First tenets are understood and experienced across youth justice services.

As children

Children had positive experiences with youth justice services and felt that their experiences and capabilities were recognised

The **'as children'** tenet within the Child First framework emphasises the need for services to be child-focused, taking into account the experiences, needs and potential

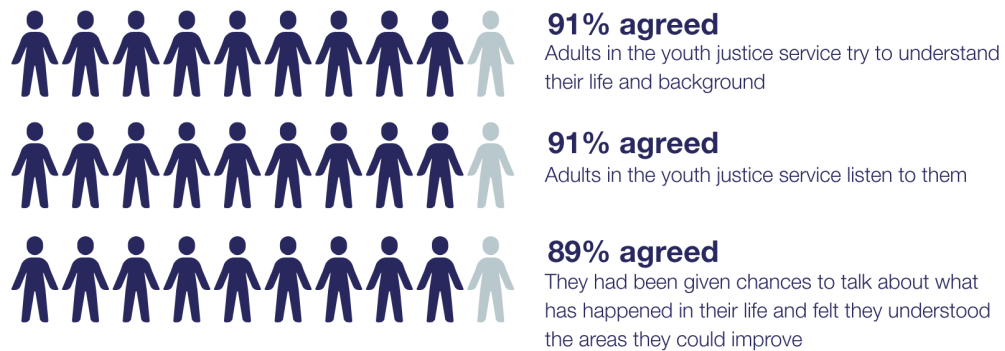
¹ Due to the small sample size, results should be interpreted with caution.

of each individual child. This tenet emphasises that support should be tailored to recognise children's capabilities and respect their perspectives ([YJB, 2022](#)).

Our survey results show that, **overall, children had positive experiences regarding how their caseworkers engaged with them.** Of the 53 children surveyed, **91% agreed that adults in their youth justice service try to understand their background and listen to them,** with 72% 'strongly agreeing' and 19% 'slightly agreeing' (see Graph 1). This indicates that children felt practitioners were actively making an effort to understand and consider their individual experiences. These findings echo evidence from the Lancashire Youth Justice Service's Child First Pathfinder ([2022](#)) review, which found that children on their diversion programme felt listened to and respected by practitioners. The children on this programme noted that they felt valued, with respect and active listening from practitioners playing a crucial role in their engagement.

Furthermore, 89% of children who responded to our survey reported that their caseworker had given them the opportunity to discuss their life experiences, with only 4% saying they had not had this opportunity and 6% unsure (see Graph 1). This indicates that practitioners are creating space for children to share significant aspects of their lives and backgrounds. This aligns with the 'as children' tenet which emphasises the importance of practitioners understanding each child's individual circumstances in order to tailor interventions that address their specific needs.

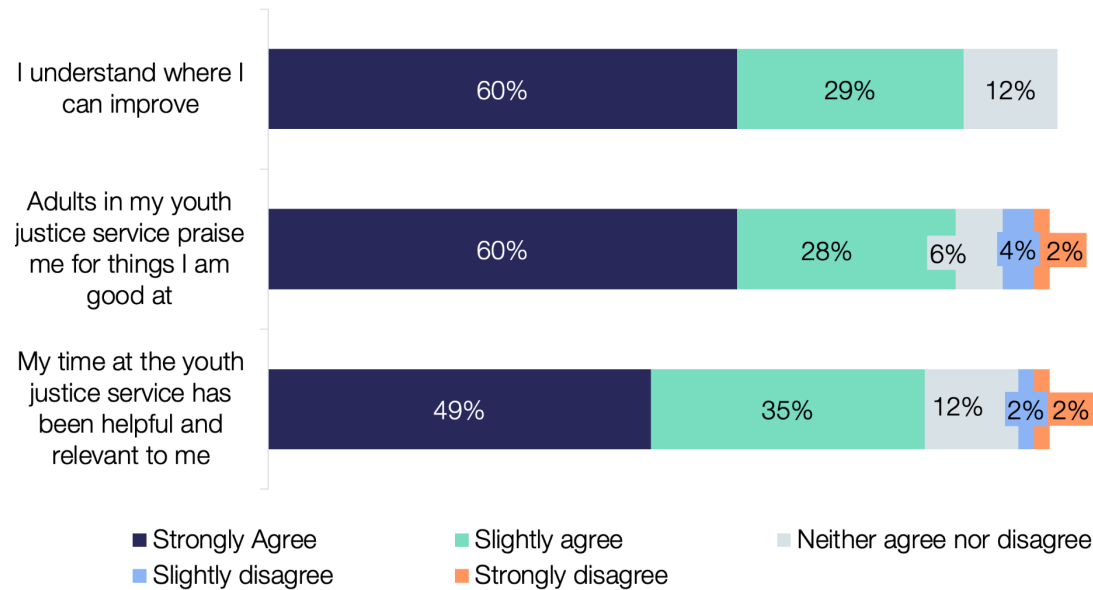
Graph 1: Proportion of children who answered 'strongly' and 'slightly' agreed in the question: Based on your time at the youth justice service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 53)



When asked to **what extent they thought that the youth justice service acknowledged and sought to strengthen their capabilities**, 83% of children reported that **their caseworker helped them learn new skills**, and 84% of children said that **their time in the youth justice service has been helpful and relevant to them**.

A slightly higher proportion of children, 88%, stated that their youth justice service praised them for their strengths and 89% said they felt they understood the areas they could improve (see Graph 2).

Graph 2: Proportion of children who answered the question: Based on your time at the youth justice service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 53)

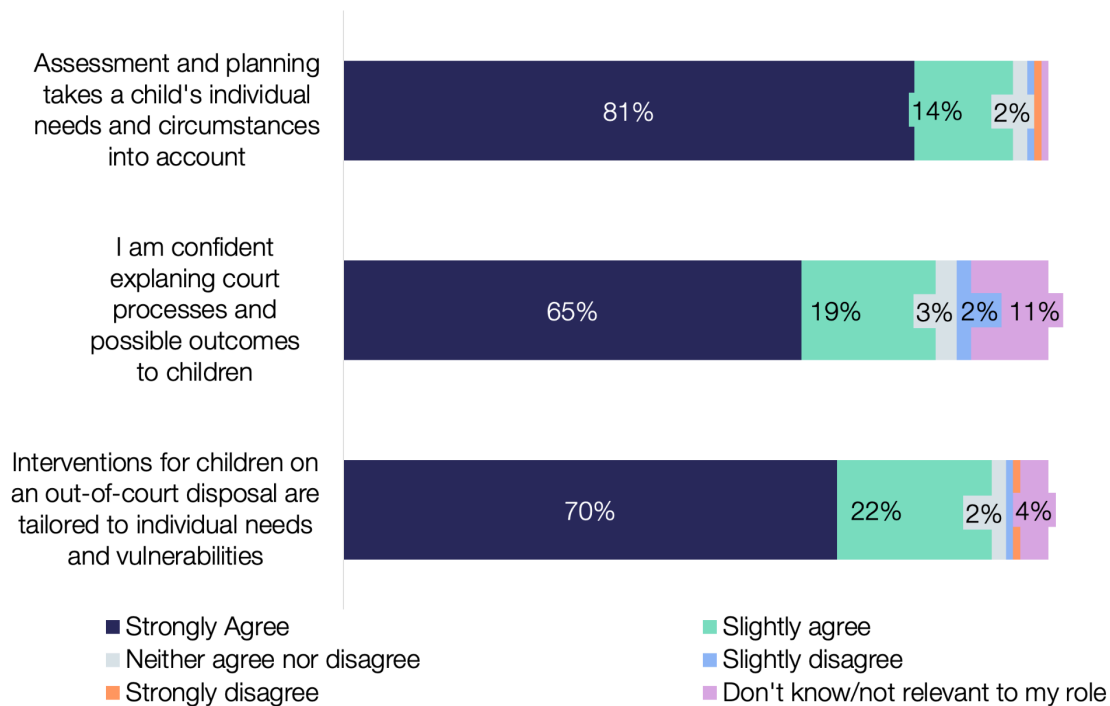


These findings emphasise broadly positive feedback from children that youth justice services recognise their experience and potential. These findings align with feedback from youth justice service practitioners; in our survey, almost all youth justice service practitioners and statutory partners (92%) agreed that out-of-court interventions at their service are tailored to children’s needs and vulnerabilities, and a higher proportion (95%) agreed that assessments and planning take into account children’s individual needs (see Graph 3). In focus groups, one practitioner highlighted that the AssetPlus assessment can be a useful tool to support in fostering collaboration with children and enabling ownership around planning.

“[In reference to AssetPlus] What is it that they want from us, rather than us just telling them what it is we want from them. [...] I think that's expanded into the Child First framework, and you know that notion of collaboration where we're encouraging them to let us know what it is we can do rather than just saying “Police have said you need to do this” - Intervention Worker

An important element of the ‘as children’ tenet is ensuring that engagement with children, especially in relation to formal settings or processes, is clear and accessible. Encouragingly, a majority (84%) of practitioners felt confident in their ability to explain court processes and outcomes to children (see Graph 3).

Graph 3: Proportion of youth justice service practitioners and statutory partners who answered the question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? (n=138)



During workshops, practitioners further highlighted that ensuring children understand what to expect in different settings, such as at court or in secure settings, is a key element of the tenet. This also involves actively liaising with social workers and other relevant partners to ensure that children receive the necessary support. For instance, if a child experiences high levels of anxiety at court, efforts could be made to relocate them to a more suitable and calming environment to help manage their distress.

"For me, it's reminding ourselves that yes, the offending might be serious, but they are children, and I think it's about taking a more nurturing approach towards their behaviours and understanding the complexity of the issues that these young people have gone through" - Case Manager

Building prosocial identity

Children felt supported to develop skills and make positive progress. However, fewer children felt part of their community

The **'building pro-social identity'** tenet is about promoting each child's capacities and strengths to foster a pro-social identity in the community. Additionally, the tenet is aimed at building supportive relationships that empower children to make contributions to society ([YJB, 2022](#)). As such, a key aspect of the tenet is the creation of environments where children feel supported by the adults around them so they are better equipped to recognise and build on their own strengths. Our survey results showed that **the majority of children (95%) reported feeling supported by the adults in their youth justice service**. This high level of agreement demonstrated that children perceive a sense of support that is crucial for fostering their pro-social identity and empowering them to contribute to society.

This finding is echoed in feedback from practitioners, who recognised the importance of fostering prosocial identity through tailored, strength-based approaches. In our survey, almost all practitioners (95%) felt that their youth justice service supports children to build a pro-social identity as part of their plan, with 88% of practitioners agreeing that out-of-court interventions at their service are tailored to promote positive behaviours and pro-social identity in the community. During qualitative engagement,

practitioners highlighted strength-based work as key to this, as well as community engagement and activities.

“I think there is a lot more of a **focus on building on strengths and promoting regular typical behaviours for the children** – having activities that they do outside of school and things just to keep them busy and promote, you know, a positive pro-social identity.” - Interventions Worker

“We've looked at things that are more linked to children, **their aspirations and their strengths that they can sustain that will give them that different sense of self.**” - Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

Several practitioners related this work to restorative justice approaches. For instance, one youth justice service highlighted the use of a tool called "Putting Things Right," a document that encourages children to take responsibility for their actions and repair harm. This initiative prioritises accountability while promoting personal growth through active involvement. The tool also supports active collaboration with children in line with the Child First tenets, as children are encouraged to contribute their own examples and ideas on how they can take responsibility, ensuring a more meaningful and engaged approach to rehabilitation.

While practitioners described using collaborative tools like 'Putting Things Right' to support accountability and engagement, children's perspectives suggest that there may be differences in how this support is experienced, particularly when it comes to solving personal problems. For instance, **a slightly lower proportion (79%) of children agreed that their caseworker has helped them to solve problems in their life** - with 50% strongly agreeing and 29% slightly agreeing with this statement (see Graph 4). While this still represents a substantial level of positive engagement, it highlights **an area worth exploring further**. Particularly, because it raises questions

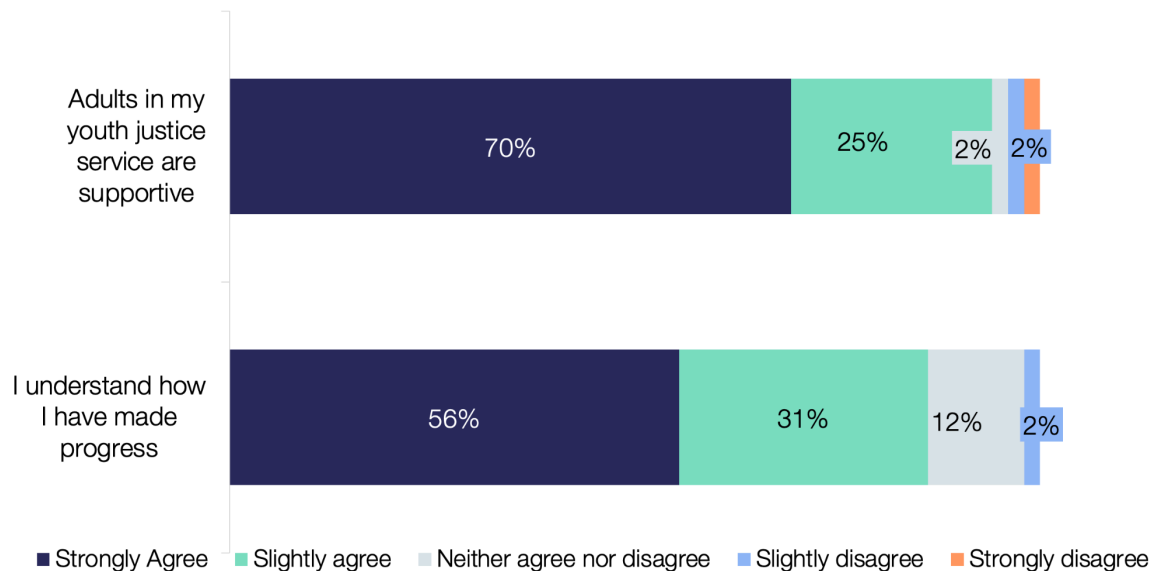
about what ‘solving problems’ means from the perspective of children and how this aligns with the scope of support that youth justice services can provide. Exploring these perceptions could offer valuable insights into how practitioners might more effectively support children or how youth justice services can work in partnerships to address wider issues impacting children’s daily lives.

Graph 4: Proportion of children who answered ‘strongly’ or ‘slightly’ agreed to the question: Based on your time at the youth justice service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 53)



When it comes to understanding their personal growth, 87% of children said that **they understood how they had made progress** (see Graph 5), and 92% reported receiving feedback from their caseworker on that progress. This high level of agreement from children around **feedback and self-awareness** highlights that youth justice services were incentivising a reflective process and encouraging children to recognise their achievements.

Graph 5: Proportion of children who answered the question: Based on your time at the youth justice service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 53)



An important element of building a pro-social identity is establishing supportive relationships within the community. In our survey, **a lower proportion (60%) of children reported feeling part of their community**, while **29% neither agreed nor disagreed that they felt part of their community** (see Graph 6). This suggests that, while a majority of children feel connected, there may be opportunities to strengthen the sense of community for those who were less certain. Given the importance of community connection, **further actions should be taken to understand what community can mean for children and where youth justice services fit within that context.** Strengthening the understanding of community could help to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for children, ensuring that youth justice services are effectively integrated into the communities they serve and contributing to the development of children’s pro-social identity.

Graph 6: Proportion of children who answered 'strongly' or 'slightly' agreed to the question: Based on your time at the youth justice service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 53)



The need to understand and strengthen community connection is relevant in the context of evidence on the levels of loneliness experienced by children more widely, and particularly those with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) in England or Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in Wales. Given that there is no obvious control 'community connection' measure for us to test against, we have considered loneliness as a proxy measure. Loneliness has been widely used as an indicator of wellbeing, and recent studies – such as McNamara et al. ([2021](#)) – have explored the link between loneliness, community identification, and health outcomes. While loneliness is not an equivalent measure for community, the two are interconnected as indicators of social wellbeing – especially in children ([McNamara, et al., 2021](#)). According to the Children's Commissioner ([2022](#)), 31% of children with SEND in England reported feeling lonely at least some of the time compared to 18% for children without SEND. The prevalence of feeling lonely often or some of the time is higher among older children with SEND, with 45% of those aged 16-17 years old reported feeling lonely often or some of the time – compared to those aged 12-15 (38%) and 8-11 (33%).

This concern around the loneliness experienced by children with SEND is amplified when viewed in the context of youth justice, where children with SEND are significantly overrepresented. While 13.6% of pupils in England are identified as having SEND ([Department of Education, 2024](#)), research consistently shows that the proportion of children with SEND in the youth justice system is higher. For instance, government statistics from 2021 show that 80% of the children in England who had been

cautioned or sentenced for any offence had been recorded as having special education needs, rising to 86% among those involved in serious violence offences ([Department of Education, 2023](#)). Additionally, the YJB and Ministry of Justice ([2021](#)) has also reported that 71% of children in the youth justice system in England and Wales had a speech, language and communication need. These overrepresentations further reinforce the importance of ensuring that community engagement efforts and youth justice services are inclusive and responsive to diverse experiences and needs for all children, especially those at higher risk of social isolation.

When asked about their parents/carers' involvement in the work they do with the youth justice service, 87% of children said their parents/carers understood what they were doing within the youth justice service, **highlighting children's experience that their parents/carers are generally informed and engaged**. Additional evidence from the YJB's Child First Pathfinders in Lancashire ([2022](#)) and West Midlands ([2021](#)) shows the potential positive impact of parental involvement. In both pathfinders, parents expressed appreciation for the support provided by the youth justice service to their children. In the West Midlands ([2021](#)), for those parents engaged in the programme, there was a positive impact on their perceived confidence with parenting and on their wellbeing, evidencing the value of active parental involvement. However, evidence from different sources including Hampson, Nisbet and Case ([2024](#)) suggests that parents' relationship with youth justice services can be fraught, with some parents disengaged in their child's path, while others distrust the system. As such, further research is needed to explore parents' own perspectives, understand the impact youth justice-focused interventions have on them, and ensure they fully understand the interventions their children are receiving.

Case study - West Midlands Child First Pathfinder ([2021](#))

As part of the Youth Justice Board's Child First Pathfinders, the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit (WMVRU), in conjunction with the seven West Midlands (Police & Crime Commissioner area) youth justice services, produced a review on the implementation of the Kitchen Table Talks (KTT) programme across the seven services. The programme sought, among other things, to support and work closely with the parents of children involved with the youth justice system, acting as a bridge between the parents and the youth justice services.

The evaluation of the KTT programme aimed to assess its impact on reducing reoffending, improving the child-parent relationship and enhancing the parents' knowledge, confidence and engagement with the youth justice services.

Qualitative findings from the evaluation revealed that the programme empowered parents by upskilling them and enabled them to become parent ambassadors. As an ambassador, parents have the opportunity to share their expertise to further develop the KTT project, and use it as a space for reflection and to strengthen their confidence. Finally, the programme supported parents to be more involved in their child's progress and improved youth engagement in youth justice programmes. Also, quantitative analysis of the 198 parents referred between late 2020 and early 2022 showed a statistically significant increase in parents' wellbeing and parenting confidence. Regarding the impact on reoffending, the report acknowledged that the effects of the programme on reoffending will take time to become evident and, as such, no conclusions were drawn in this area.

Recommendations

1. To increase the proportion of children who feel that their case worker has supported them to address a challenge in their daily lives, **the YJB should continue to identify and disseminate good practice via online forums (e.g. the Resource Hub and YJ Bulletin) highlighting how services have supported children to address day-to-day challenges** - including financial advice and seconded career guidance or educational support.
2. To improve parental engagement across England and Wales, **the YJB could disseminate lessons learned from good practice – such as the Kitchen Table Talks (a successful parental engagement initiative in the West Midlands) – to all youth justice services through short, digestible formats** to improve overall parental understanding of youth justice interventions, and boost confidence and engagement.
3. To increase the proportion of children who feel a strong sense of community as a protective factor, **the YJB should disseminate information for practitioners reflecting that our research found that this is not as high as other protective factors.** YJB guidance for Management Boards should cover the need to involve other agencies who may be better positioned to foster a sense of community given their structures (e.g. sports and arts' clubs, opportunities to volunteer, training).

Collaborating with children

Children felt involved in planning their time at the youth justice service and included in decisions about them. However, there are more opportunities for collaboration at a strategic level - including through formal mechanisms like youth forums to incorporate children's feedback into service design

The **'collaborating with children'** tenet focuses on encouraging children's active participation while also fostering engagement and wider social inclusion ([YJB, 2022](#)). An evaluation of the Sandwell Child First pathfinder ([2025](#)) highlighted key success factors for effective collaboration including child-led activities, the integration of creative arts, and moving away from traditional school-like environments. These elements were shown to foster meaningful participation and resulted in positive outcomes for children.

Case study - Sandwell Child First Pathfinder ([2025](#))

Starting in January 2019, Sandwell youth justice service received funding from the Youth Justice Board's Serious Violence grant to increase the use of arts with children involved in youth violence. The youth justice service implemented a flexible approach to address the diverse needs of the children they work with. In partnership with the Institute of Community Research and Development at the University of Wolverhampton, they provided a range of cultural and arts activities for children to get involved with. They also allowed for practitioners to be creative and design more innovative intervention plans. Additionally, they aimed to accredit the work of children for their CVs, engage with the local community and build links with agencies to establish accessible vocational or education pathways to children.

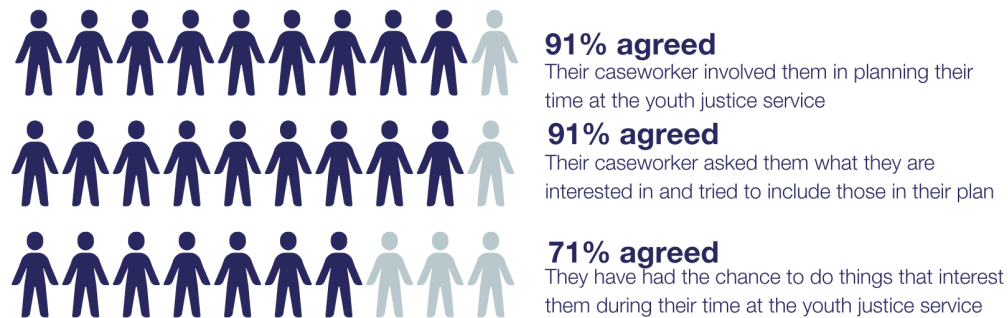
The Institute for Community Research and Development ([2019](#)) was commissioned to conduct **a process and impact evaluation**, combining quantitative data to track

changes and in-depth qualitative interviews with children to understand if the youth justice service's approach had any impact or changes in children's relationships outside of the youth justice service, if there was an impact on attitudes, behaviour and wellbeing and youth justice services openness, and confidence, when using arts and creativity.

The **qualitative data revealed improvements in children's engagement, confidence, well-being, and aspirations**. Both children and staff developed new skills, and relationships between them became more open. Quantitative findings showed an increase in the percentage of children attending contacts and a reduction in breaches of orders when participating in creative arts activities.

Our children survey results aligned with these findings, particularly in relation to collaboration around individual planning and personal development. For instance, 91% of **children reported their caseworker involved them in planning their time at the youth justice service**. The same proportion (91%) said that their **caseworker asked them what they are interested in and tried to include those things in their plan**. While still a majority, a slightly smaller proportion (71%) reported having been given the opportunity to do things that interest them in their time at the youth justice services (see Graph 7). These results indicate that while children had been involved in assessments and planning, **there may have been barriers to fully implementing children's interests as part of their plan**.

Graph 7: Proportion of children who answered 'strongly' and 'slightly' agreed to the question: Based on your time at the youth justice service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 53)

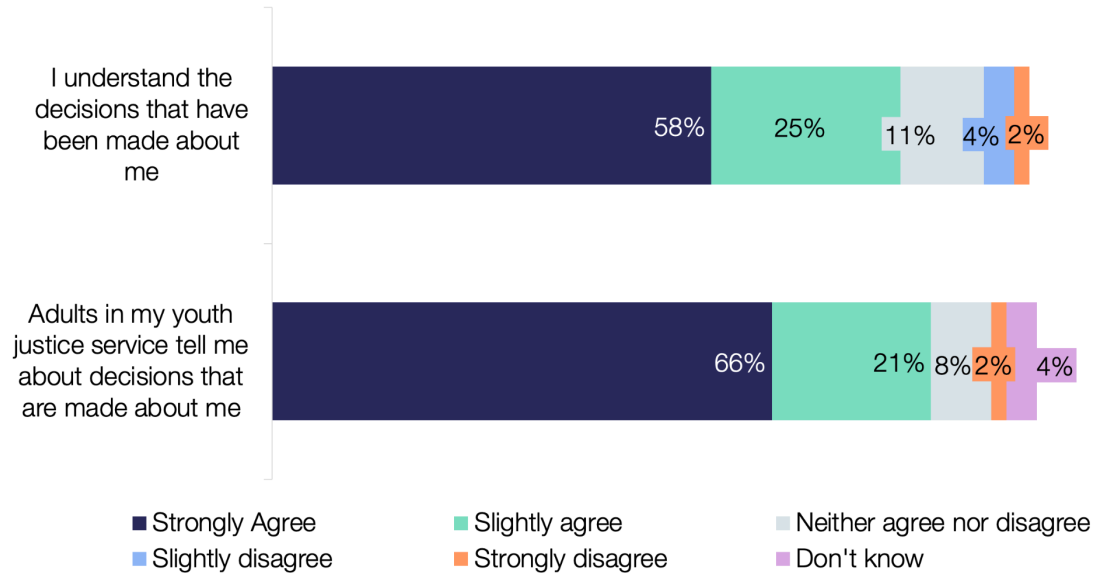


The potential gap between children being involved in planning and actually being given the opportunity to explore interests, reflects a distinction highlighted by Case and Browning ([2021](#)), who differentiate between participation – children being involved in processes, like attending meetings – and engagement, which involves forming positive relationships and feeling committed to the process. Their work underscores the importance of moving beyond surface-level involvement to fostering genuine, relational engagement in youth justice practice.

Children also reflected on their understanding of decisions made about them.

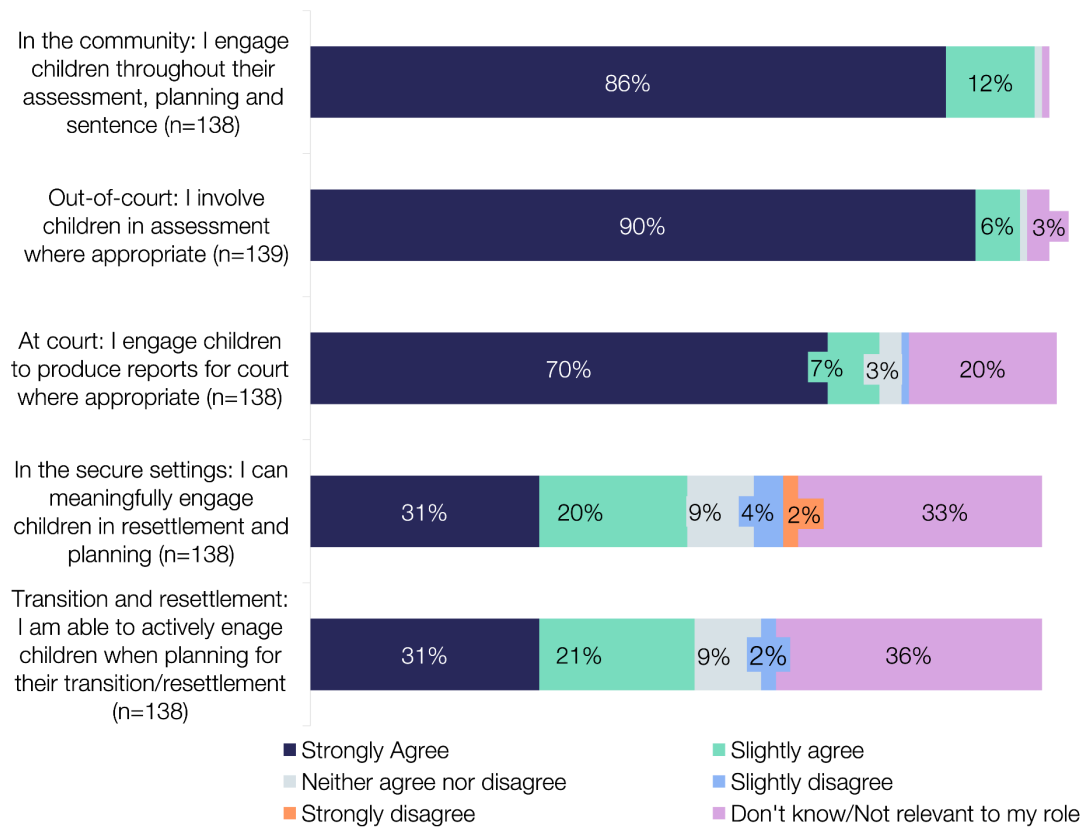
When asked about their understanding of the decisions made by the youth justice service, **87% of children said that adults in their youth justice service informed them about decisions affecting them** (see Graph 8). A slightly smaller proportion (83%) stated that they fully understood those decisions (see Graph 8). Based on our survey results, there may be opportunities for youth justice services to do more to ensure that children fully understand decisions affecting them and are empowered to ask questions and seek clarification where they do not.

Graph 8: Proportion of children who answered the question: Based on your time at the youth justice service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 53)



In our practitioner survey, practitioners demonstrated a good understanding of involving children in assessments and planning where appropriate, as part of meaningful collaboration. However, our results show that confidence and ability to involve children in assessments and planning varied depending on the setting. While over 90% of youth justice service practitioners reported that they were able to involve children in assessments and planning in community and out-of-court settings, only half of youth justice service practitioners agreed that they could engage children when planning for their transition of resettlement, including in secure settings (see Graph 9).

Graph 9: Proportion of practitioners who answered the question: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



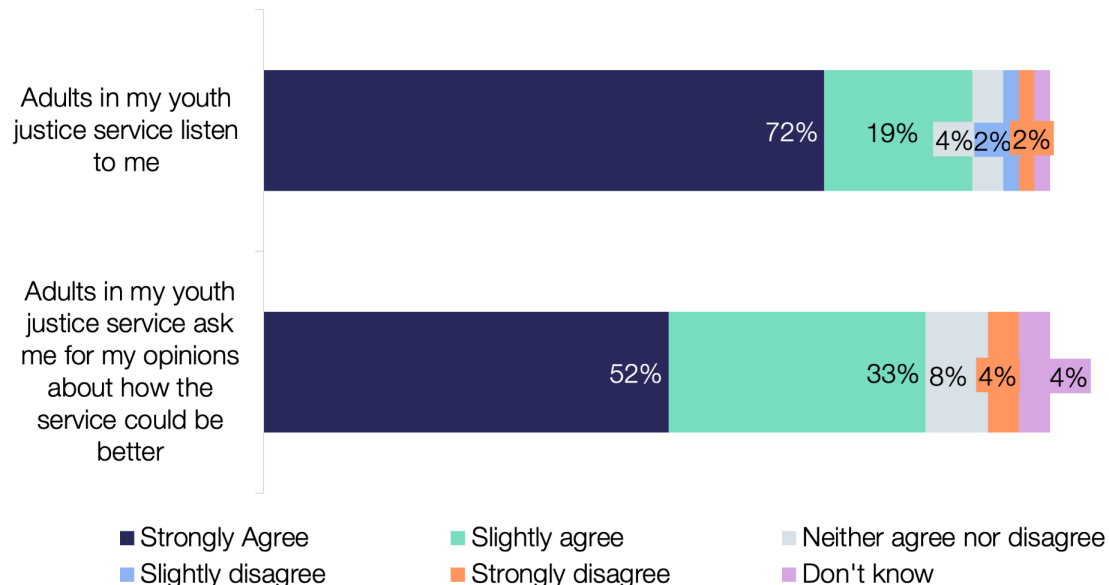
In focus groups, practitioners highlighted the challenge of supporting and collaborating meaningfully with children on short orders, particularly in more complex cases where more time is needed to build a relationship with the child and better understand their needs and how they are best engaged.

“It'd be nice to have longer and not have the sort of more restricted 12 weeks because to get in there and help guide the child to that positive identity, collaborate with them, really build that relationship. [...] But we are restricted with time and then when you add to that the complexity of the cases.” - Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

To support practitioners to manage the reality of short orders, and still effectively apply the Child First tenets in work with children in these cases, the YJB should consider how guidance and training specifically addresses application of the tenets to a shorter timeframe, and in more complex cases.

Beyond individual planning, our children survey results suggest that children have been given opportunities to contribute to discussions about how youth justice services operate, highlighting collaboration at a more strategic level. A high proportion (91%) of children felt that adults in their youth justice services listened to them, and 85% of children said they had been asked for their opinions on how the youth justice service could be improved (see Graph 10).

Graph 10: Proportion of children who answered the question: Based on your time at the youth justice service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 53)



However, evidence by Case, Hampson and Nisbet ([2024](#)) suggests that children's experiences of collaboration with agencies across the youth justice system are inconsistent. While collaboration with youth justice services was generally viewed

positively, children reported more negative experiences in their interactions and engagement with the police, courts, and children's social services. It is important to continue exploring how children's feedback is taken forward by agencies to influence delivery, and if children can see tangible outcomes from their input to reinforce that their perspective is valued in shaping the services they receive.

In focus groups, some youth justice practitioners **highlighted barriers to effectively collaborate with children more strategically and ensure their voices are heard at a service-level**. One manager expressed concern that collaboration with children that focused on strategic decision making could be tokenistic when conducted without sufficient planning or expertise, or where formal structures for participation and collaboration do not exist.

"People sort of feel like we have to get children involved somehow. [...] I think it's becoming less Child First and more kind of professional first"- Service Manager

There is appetite across services for more support and information from the YJB on how to meaningfully engage and collaborate with children; this support could build on participatory models for engagement (e.g., [Aldridge, 2016](#)). One of the services engaged for this research acknowledged that the lack of a dedicated physical space for children to use impacted their ability to effectively collaborate and encourage participation.

"Collaborating with children in the wider sense [...] as a youth justice partnership we struggle getting children on board [...] does that come down to not having a space or is it because they're only open to us for such a short amount of time?"
- Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

Factors such as space, time and available resources to engage, collaborate and support children effectively are important environmental factors for the YJB to consider and account for when sharing information and guidance on the application of the Child First framework. Recognising and circulating materials that reflect the challenging environments that practitioners sometimes face will ensure that these materials are functional and adaptable to the realities of casework.

Recommendations

4. To strengthen collaboration with children and provide clarity on how their feedback has been acted upon, **the YJB should encourage services to continue to seek feedback from children regularly, and use a child-friendly ‘you said, we did’ template to reflect back to children where their feedback has shaped the service delivery.**

5. To support practitioners to adapt practice to environmental challenges, including limited time to work with children with complex cases and the lack of a physical environment to encourage participation and collaboration, **the YJB should identify and share practice that reflects these challenging contexts, so that practitioners have access to materials that are functional and relevant** to the realities of casework.

Diverting from stigma

Children felt supported to plan for their future, and most did not feel judged by practitioners

‘Diverting from stigma’ is about minimising criminogenic stigma from contact with the youth justice system’ ([YJB, 2022](#)). This includes prevention and diversion work to prevent escalation into the formal youth justice system and the associated stigma ([YJB, 2021](#)).

Evidence from several Child First Pathfinders – including Lancashire ([2022](#)) and Southwark ([2022](#)) – illustrated the positive impact of ‘diverting from stigma’ in reducing reoffending. For instance, a review of Lancashire’s Diversion Service – which takes a trauma-informed and restorative approach to ‘place co-production and participation of children at its centre’ ([Wainwright, Nowland, O’Riodan and Larkins, 2022](#)) – showed that 80% of children who had accessed the service did not reoffend. Similarly, in Southwark, relationship-based activities drawing on the lived experience of peer navigators resulted in higher levels of engagement and participation from programme participants, improved emotional health, mental health and self confidence. This translated to higher levels of compliance, and therefore lower breach rates and lower reoffending rates.

Case study - Southwark Child First Pathfinder ([2022](#))

The Southwark Child First Pathfinder ([2022](#)) focused on evaluating the ongoing partnership between Youth Ink and Southwark youth justice service, which has been active for almost 10 years. Youth Ink delivered different activities within the youth justice service, but also contributed to policy and practice discussions within the youth justice service, provided advice to practitioners, and supported community projects, such as the 'Trauma-informed Weapon Awareness Programme' (TIWAP) and parenting education on issues like grooming and child exploitation.

In their first year of work with the youth justice service, Youth Ink delivered the 'Our Journey' personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) programme, which focused on building self-esteem, confidence, and life skills. 22 young people completed the programme, and 10 became 'Peer Leaders,' supporting others in the youth justice service. By 2017-2018, Youth Ink consolidated its model, expanding to work more directly with children.

The Southwark Child First Pathfinder ([2022](#)) focused on reporting three key activities: the Peer-Led Conversation Hub, Just Hear Us, and the Peer Support Navigator Network. These activities engaged children, allowing them to share their experiences and advocate for change within the youth justice system. The Peer Support Navigator Network provided voluntary one-on-one support in areas like education, employment, and mental health. The programme began with 10 participants who completed Peer Support Navigator training and led workshops. Over time, service users transitioned to volunteers, sessional workers, and eventually full-time employees. As of March 2022, Youth Ink employed three Peer Support Navigators, with many others gaining employment through the programme.

Youth Ink's approach ensured children continue to support others through their lived experiences in the criminal justice system, creating a sustainable model of peer-led

support. Moreover, the report suggested that Youth Ink's approach, across all three activities, resulted in higher levels of engagement/participation from programme participants, improved emotional health, mental health and self confidence. Service providers reported that aligned to this, there were higher levels of compliance which translated into lower breach rates and lower reoffending rates.

In workshops and interviews, youth justice service practitioners emphasised the importance of tailoring interventions to individual needs and having an awareness of the child's background to reduce the risk of reinforcing stigma. Practitioners described adopting an advocacy-based role with partners to divert children from the formal criminal justice system, recognising the harms and outcomes associated with contact with the system. They focused on securing the 'lowest' possible outcome for each child and emphasised the importance of prevention programs.

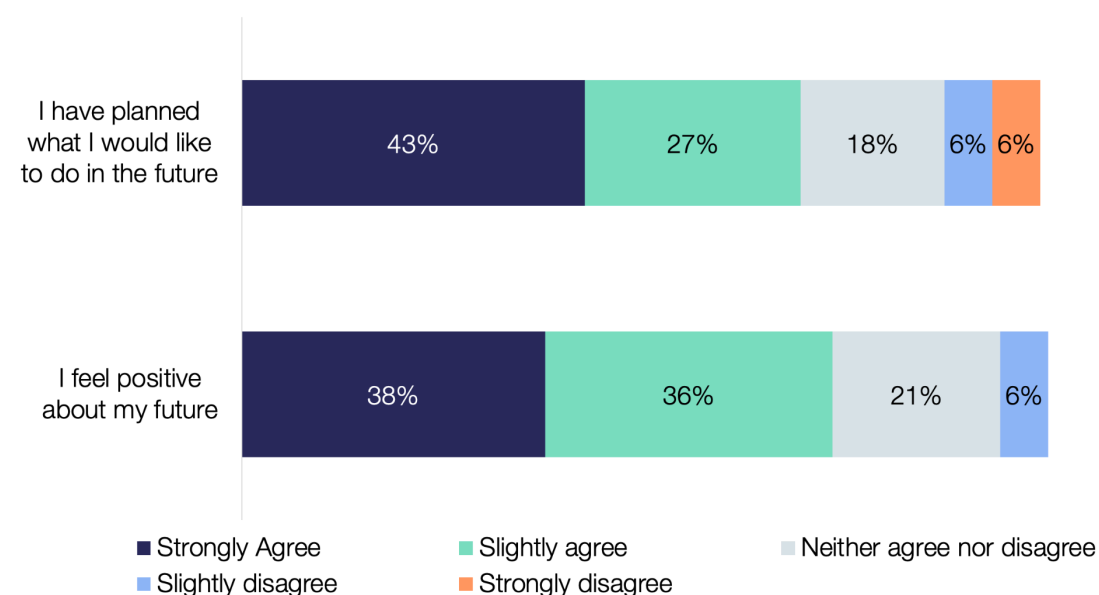
"We are always really trying to divert as much as we can, so you might not be able to go as low as you would want to with a disposal, but I suppose we always try to address the needs of the child, you know, tailoring the right intervention" - Service Manager

Our survey results show that 84% of youth justice service managers agreed that the approach taken at their service minimises the potential harm caused to children through contact with the justice system, in line with the Child First framework.

Creating a non-judgemental, supportive environment is an important element of the **'diverting from stigma'** tenet, as it can help to reduce the negative impacts of stigma. Our survey results indicated that **the majority of children (74%) did not feel judged by adults in the youth justice service**. These findings suggested children perceive an environment where they are understood and supported, helping to reduce stigma. Another key element of this tenet is to prevent long-term negative

consequences and instead promote developmental pathways. In our survey, when asked about their perceptions on the future, **74% of children reported feeling positive about their future**, with **21% neither agreeing nor disagreeing that they felt positive about their future** (see Graph 11). When asked about future plans, a **slightly smaller proportion (70%) of children had planned what they would like to do in the future**, 18% said they had not made plans for what they would like to do (see Graph 11). However, almost all children (91%) mentioned that their caseworker had encouraged them to think about the future and their hopes, with 81% saying their caseworker has helped them work out what they are good at.

Graph 11: Proportion of children who answered the question: Based on your time at the Youth Justice Service. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (n= 51)



This **suggests that caseworkers are playing an active role in fostering a forward-thinking mindset**. While the uncertainty and lack of planning expressed by roughly a fifth of children may reflect typical doubts and uncertainties many experience,

it also indicates an area where youth justice services should continue to focus resources and support in line with the Child First framework.

Perceptions about the future can be shaped by a range of factors, which may help explain why some children in our survey felt uncertain or had not yet made plans. Factors such as past experiences, current challenges, and limited access to education or employment opportunities can all create barriers to envisioning positive futures. While our findings highlight the positive role that caseworkers play in encouraging future thinking, broader data provides important context – particularly for children with additional needs. In the Children’s Commissioner’s [\(2022\)](#) nationally representative survey in England, 40% of children with SEND mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic in their open-text responses and its potential impact on their families as their biggest concern for the coming year. Education was the second most mentioned worry (22%), and 7% of children with SEND mentioned family-related worries. Additionally, children also mentioned mental and physical health concerns such as anxiety, sickness, and loneliness. Additionally, although results from the survey are drawn from a different sample and survey methodology, these concerns mentioned by children with SEND offer examples of the range of factors that can impact confidence in the future and highlight the importance of continued, targeted support to help all children, especially the most vulnerable, build hopeful and achievable pathways forward.

Despite our findings on the positive application of the ‘diverting from stigma’ tenet, **significant gaps in evidence remain around the impact and benefits of diversion and its role in youth justice.** In their [report](#), ‘Valuing youth diversion: a toolkit’, the Centre for Justice Innovation identified three core areas requiring further research: identifying the point at which diversion’s effectiveness diminishes, exploring children’s lived experiences of diversion, and developing a consensus on which diversion strategies yield the most widespread impact. The YJB is working to address

these evidence gaps through its Pathfinders programme, improving internal assessment tools (e.g. [YJB's Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool](#)), and investment in data and research infrastructure. These initiatives aim to build a more robust evidence base to guide future practice and policy.

Recommendations

6. Youth justice services should review how the children they support are engaged in conversations about future planning to understand how children's perceptions might be influenced by external factors or concerns, such as limited access to education or employment opportunities, and how practitioners and partners might provide additional support.

Section 2: Communicating and embedding the Child First framework at a local level

This section examines how youth justice services and their staff have integrated the Child First framework into everyday practice and how they communicate its principles both internally and to partners.

As outlined in the previous section, the practitioners' survey and qualitative engagement with youth justice service practitioners across England and Wales **demonstrated a high level of understanding about the Child First tenets.** For instance, 96% of practitioners stated they were familiar with the tenets and 95% of practitioners reported they were clear on how to apply the tenets of Child First in their roles. This finding was consolidated during our deep dive engagement with two youth justice services, where both frontline practitioners and managers explained that **the framework had encouraged them to shift their thinking into a more child-centred approach, leading them to frame their interventions with a recognition of a child's context rather than the offence they committed.** The high level of familiarity with the tenets of Child First indicate that awareness of the framework is widespread and there has been broad success in communicating this evidence-base to youth justice services across England and Wales.

"[Child First is] treating children as children and not offenders. Working with them to help them to stay out of trouble. And prevent them from getting further into the justice system" - Intervention Worker

"I would say it's about, you know, identifying the strengths that the child has personally in the community, [...] and really [...] honing in on that and being able to sort of get positives out of that" - Victim Liaison Officer

Understanding the framework as evidence-based 'best practice'

Most practitioners embraced the Child First framework as a consolidation of existing best practice but, for some, more can be done to provide reassurance and clarify the framework

Practitioners demonstrated an intuitive understanding of the tenets as evidence-based 'best practice'. For most practitioners engaged via our deep dives, the Child First framework served to reinforce existing best practice and introduce helpful terminology or labels for ways of working that were already well-embedded at services.

"I think that in terms of the four tenets of the Child First framework, we've definitely been working towards those for years, but now we can actually put a title against seeing children as children. We've always been doing that, from my perspective" - Quality Assurance and Practice Development Manager

"I've been with the service since 2016 and this is something that we have been doing for certain. So I think for me, Child First, is a new label to something that we've been already doing" - Youth Justice and Victim Worker

However, for some youth justice practitioners, there was still some uncertainty and hesitation on the practical implications of the framework, including a resistance from some to perceived changes to process and strategic direction.

"I think there's a lot of confusion about what Child First is. I think the confusion doesn't mean that they're not working in a Child First way, because I think the principles are pretty straightforward really [...]. It can create a bit of confusion

because [...] what is it I need to learn? You know, there's a lot of confusion." - Service Manager

Our deep dives revealed differences in how the tenets of Child First were communicated and embedded at a service level, which may help to explain these conflicting perspectives. For one of the youth justice services we engaged, the management team are new in post, and have proactively shared literature and information about the Child First tenets in different formats, including podcasts, social media posts and webinars. Despite this, managers reported a resistance from some practitioners to embracing the language and materials of the Child First framework, and possibly some anxiety brought on by a perceived shift in culture.

"We were faced with a team that had the culture of doing the same things the same way for a long time, and I think the prospect of doing something differently and working to another different framework was very causal of anxiety for staff"- Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

"We had this problem at the start. Where we were talking about Child First a lot, but people were, I think, mixing that up with child-friendly." - Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

The second service engaged via our deep dive reported a good familiarity with trauma-informed practice, and understood the introduction and application of the Child First tenets as closely aligned with this way of working. As such, practitioners reported less anxiety about a shift to a new framework or terminology, and were comfortable considering the Child First framework as an extension of a well-embedded, trauma-informed approach.

“They may have offended, but they are children and we should treat them as such. Also, it [the Child First framework] falls in line with ‘we are trauma-informed Youth Justice Service’” - Quality Assurance and Practice Development Manager

“I think [the Child First framework] is mostly instinctive to our service because we were one of the very early adopters of a trauma-informed approach.” - Service Manager

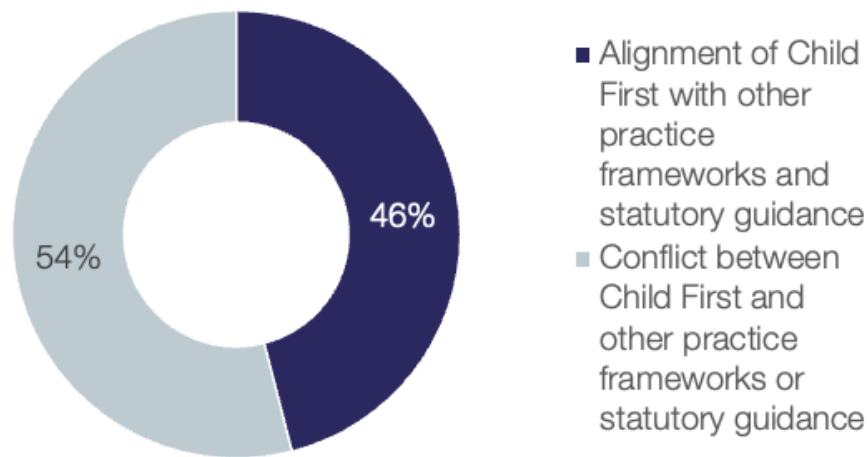
Considering the experience of both services, it appears that explicitly connecting and relating the Child First framework with practice that is familiar to practitioners (such as trauma-informed practice) can reduce anxiety about a shift in ways of working, or new terminology. When embedding the Child First tenets, services should look to emphasise Child First as a framework for evidence-based practice, which will draw on and consolidate existing best practice that is familiar to practitioners.

Alignment with other youth justice approaches

Practitioners generally understood Child First as a framework aligned with other youth justice approaches

Our survey explored the extent to which practitioners perceived an alignment between the Child First framework and other practice frameworks. We asked practitioners to select whether alignment of the Child First framework with other practice frameworks and statutory guidance had been more of a barrier or enabler to implementation. There was no clear majority perspective on this, with just under half of practitioners (46%) stating that alignment between the Child First framework and other frameworks had been a factor that had acted as a facilitator to implementation, while just over half (54%) felt that conflict between frameworks had been a barrier (see Graph 12).

Graph 12: Proportion of practitioners who answered the question: In your experience, have the factors below been barriers or enablers to implementing Child First? (n=125)



During interviews and focus groups, **practitioners linked trauma-informed and restorative justice approaches to the Child First framework**, indicating an awareness of the overlap and alignment of these ways of working. During workshops, practitioners were asked to place statements within a Venn diagram to illustrate any overlaps between the **Child First framework, trauma-informed, and restorative approaches (see Annex B)**. These statements, which stem from the Youth Justice Board Resource Hub, highlighted key elements and practices associated with the three different practices (i.e. promotes children's individual strengths and capacities). Many practitioners found it difficult to clearly separate the three, noting that **the concepts are deeply interconnected in practice**. For instance, during the workshop, practitioners mentioned the role and importance of understanding the trauma that a child may be carrying, as part of implementing evidence-based best practice. Generally, practitioners were comfortable with how these frameworks and ways of working overlapped and felt confident leaning on different approaches in their direct work with children.

However, in a few cases, practitioners were less clear on how the Child First framework aligned with other approaches for working with children. In particular, for one practitioner speaking in a focus group, there was a perceived conflict between the Child First framework and restorative justice approaches, which they described as placing 'victims first'. This practitioner expressed that they sometimes lack clarity on how to work in a way that aligns to both frameworks. However, in the context of the focus group, this was challenged by another practitioner at the service, who felt that they did manage to navigate both frameworks in their approach, even if they did not feel this themselves.

"It may feel that you're not using the approach, but every interaction [...] when you're working with the children is actually language that they understand as well. So I think that there are elements that you're doing probably every day [...] since 2016 we've always been working in a trauma-informed way. But trauma-informed really is linked with Child First anyway" - Quality Assurance and Practice Development Manager

To support effective implementation, future resources for youth justice services (e.g. toolkits, case studies, infographics, scenario-based training) should aim to provide practical examples to demonstrate how the Child First framework is aligned with other – perhaps more familiar – ways of working such as trauma-informed practice and restorative justice approaches. By setting out how these frameworks and approaches align with the Child First framework, practitioners can feel confident that they are applying evidence-based practice.

Recommendations

7. Practitioners showed high levels of awareness and understanding of the Child First framework. However, the **Child First Pathfinders represent an important opportunity for the YJB to continue disseminating examples and case studies** on how existing programs or interventions across youth justice services apply the Child First tenets (e.g. Youth Ink in Southwark). This information could be condensed and shared online for accessibility, including via the resource hub, social media and YJ Bulletin.

8. To consolidate practitioners' understanding of the Child First framework as an evidence-based practice framework that incorporates other approaches (e.g. trauma informed and restorative approaches), **the YJB should continue to share practical resources to demonstrate how the Child First framework is aligned with other, more familiar ways of working.** This will support practitioners to feel confident that they are applying evidence-based practice and provide reassurance that the Child First framework does not represent a departure from existing best practice, nor conflict with restorative approaches.

Section 3: Guidance and training

This section looks at the guidance and resources available to support the implementation of the Child First evidence base into practice, and how well these resources are meeting the needs of frontline practitioners and managers. It also covers the training around both the Child First evidence base and the decision-making framework and **how staff prefer to learn about new practices.**

Practitioners' awareness and understanding of the Child First framework is influenced by the guidance and training available to them. Our survey results show that clear guidance played an important role in embedding the Child First framework in practice, with 86% of practitioners indicating that clear guidance had been an enabler to implementing the Child First framework.

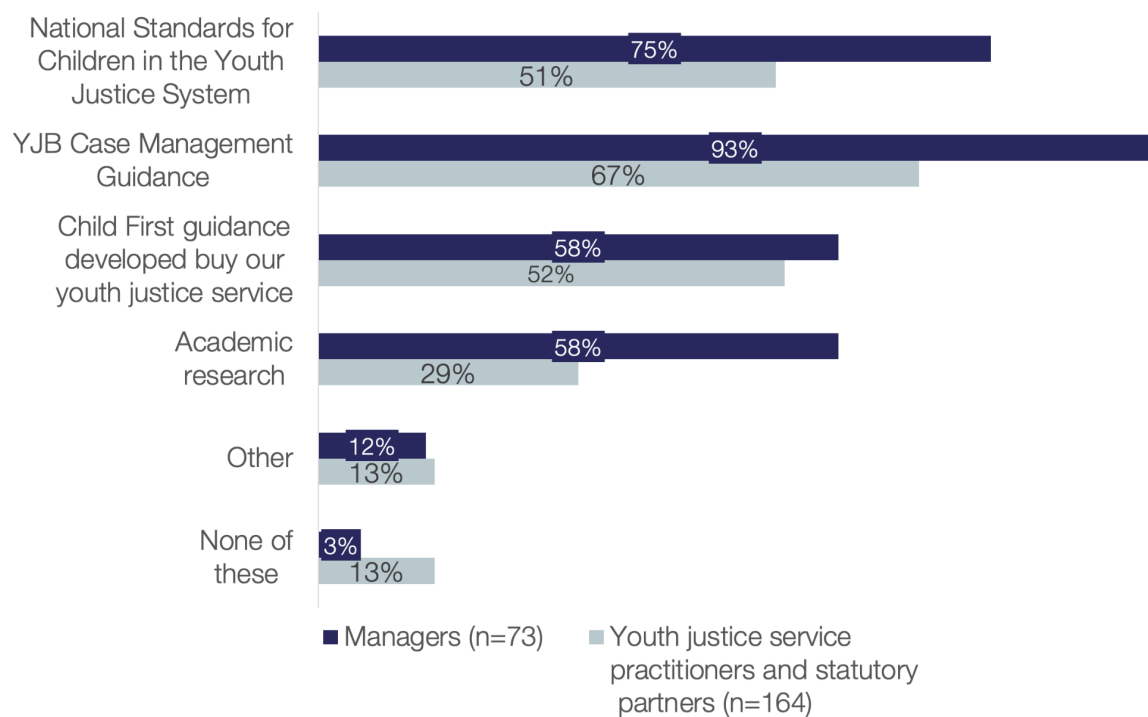
Varied use of resources

Frontline practitioners and managers' use of guidance materials varied

Our survey revealed differences in how youth justice service practitioners engage with guidance and other resources - including Case Management Guidance and National Standards for Children in the Youth Justice System - despite similar views on the quality and relevance of these materials. For instance, while a high proportion of youth justice service practitioners in a managerial role reported that they use both the National Standards (75%) and Case Management Guidance (93%) in their role, this proportion was lower across frontline youth justice service practitioners and statutory partners embedded in youth justice services - with only 51% reporting that they use the National Standards, and 67% using Case Management Guidance. A similar proportion, 58% of managers and 52% of frontline practitioners and statutory partners, reported that they use guidance on the Child First framework developed by

their youth justice service. However, 13% of frontline practitioners and statutory partners said they wouldn't use any of the guidance or resources listed below in their role (see Graph 13).

Graph 13: Proportion of practitioners who answered the question: Do you use any of the following materials to support you to apply the Child First principles in your role?



Despite this variance in which materials managers and frontline practitioners and statutory partners use, **all roles had similar perspectives on the quality and relevance of these guidance materials.** For instance, 80% of managers and 79% of frontline practitioners and statutory partners said the National Standards are easy to understand. Similarly, 85% of managers and 74% of frontline practitioners and statutory partners said the Case Management Guidance is easy to understand, However, regarding the relevance of these two resources, a smaller proportion, 58% of

managers and 65% of frontline practitioners and statutory partners said the National Standards are up to date, while 78% of managers and 71% of frontline practitioners and statutory partners said the Case Management Guidance is up to date.

Qualitative insight from focus groups with practitioners may help to explain why frontline practitioners tend to use guidance less than managers, despite holding similar views on the quality of the material. In particular, feedback from frontline practitioners suggests that ways of working are well-embedded and, among more experienced practitioners, referring back to guidance is not required as they are confident in how to approach cases. Practitioners in workshops also highlighted a lack of time to review and refer back to guidance as a barrier to its use but felt that, because processes align with guidance this would not result in bad practice.

“I remember when I first started [...] the YJB case management guidance, you know the paper form of it, it was like the Bible. We used to refer to that all the time, but these days I think – especially with how linear it is, in terms of how we do our assessments and how the plans logically are an extension of the assessment – I feel like there's flexibility in how you do it, how you approach your cases and the plans and things.” - Intervention Worker

Additionally, in focus groups some frontline practitioners suggested that current **guidance on the Child First framework - including case management guidance - does not always relate to the nuance of the contexts of individual cases**, limiting how useful it can be. One embedded statutory partner said that guidance can read as overly optimistic about children's outcomes, which in their experience did not always feel realistic.

"I find that guidance often says that if we can do this and do this, then we can change a person. And you can't always do that." - Seconded Statutory Partner (Probation)

Relatedly, some practitioners felt that the guidance had a clearer application in some youth justice settings than others. In particular, they felt that guidance on applying the Child First framework in secure settings, or with children transitioning to probation services, was less clear than guidance on how to work with children in the community.

"I think a lot of the language or literature that I've seen is more towards young people in the community. But suppose it applies the same in the same way, but I think yeah definitely I would say there's a bit of a gap around custodial settings."
- Case Manager

This finding is reflected by our survey results, which show that 92% of practitioners felt confident applying the Child First tenets in the community, and 89% in out of court disposal work. **However, only 61% of practitioners felt confident applying the tenets in secure settings and over 20% did not feel confident applying the tenets in custodial settings.** Guidance has an important role to play in ensuring that practitioners feel clear on how the Child First tenets can be applied across the different settings and environments experienced by children in the youth justice system. **Case studies on what the Child First tenets 'look like' in different settings** – including secure settings – may support practitioners to translate a familiar principle into practice in a less familiar setting. This is particularly important where services may have less experience supporting children in secure settings, due to low numbers of statutory cases.

Notably, frontline practitioners shared that they would frequently seek support from managers around the application of guidance materials, including resources produced by the YJB. Practitioners from one youth justice service described their managers as knowledgeable and reliable, and were able to rely on them for support in **unfamiliar situations or when they lacked experience in specific settings**. The role of managers in translating guidance into practice for staff at the service, including through training or service-level materials, may explain our survey findings on higher levels of use of guidance materials among managers. As such, there is an **opportunity for the YJB to further leverage the role of managers when refining and disseminating guidance materials** to ensure that materials meet the needs of staff and to incorporate feedback on the best format, frequency and focus of information. Involving managers in this process would also ensure high levels of understanding and buy-in to the Child First framework and best practice at the senior level.

Recommendations

9. Feedback from some practitioners highlighted that existing guidance on the Child First framework does not always capture the nuance of more challenging cases, and can read as overly 'optimistic' about outcomes. **The YJB should review examples and Resource Hub submissions on the Child First framework and ensure that these account for challenging contexts to support practitioners managing these situations.**

10. Relatedly, the YJB should ensure that resources on the Resource Hub **capture what the Child First tenets 'look like' in different settings**, including secure settings. This will support practitioners to translate a familiar principle into practice in a less familiar setting.

11. There is an opportunity for the YJB to leverage the knowledge and experience of managers when refining and distributing guidance materials

that relate to the Child First framework to ensure that materials meet the needs of staff and to incorporate feedback on the best format, frequency and focus of information. Involving managers in this process would also ensure high levels of understanding and buy-in to the Child First framework at the senior level.

Clear and accessible materials

Practitioners prefer easily digestible materials and sources of information

During our qualitative engagement, practitioners highlighted other resources used to expand knowledge and embed good practice. For instance, **practitioners highlighted the bi-weekly YJB bulletins and the YJB Resource Hub as important resources** for their work. In our survey, 13% of frontline practitioners reported that they use 'other' resources when implementing the Child First framework. Some examples include; conferences, trauma-informed training and materials, experience in practice and information sharing with colleagues and partners. Similarly 12% of managers reported that they use other resources, including the Hazel and O'Conner 'Activities, Interactions and Roles' (AIR) model, Open University Child First training, His Majesty Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) effective practice guidance and Youth Justice Legal Centre membership and their presentations and publications. The use of these resources, in addition to the Case Management Guidance and National Standards, indicates that practitioners find value in having access to a range of materials and resources to shape ways of working.

“Every two weeks we get a bulletin from the YJB and you get a lot of literature and information around the Child First approach and I think that's been quite helpful [...]. I think there was a resource hub that I normally use. The YJB has

different types of themes that you can download. So I think that since I've started since 2015, that's been the main kind of place that I would go to.” - Case Manager

Our qualitative engagement revealed that **both practitioners and managers have actively sought out YJB resources to further their knowledge of the Child First framework, including podcasts and visual materials such as posters, which they found to be valuable tools for staying informed.** For instance, they highlighted that the infographic shared by the YJB on the Child First tenets (see Annex C) was clear, concise, and easy to understand. Practitioners specifically noted that **podcasts and visual content were more engaging than written documents**, as these formats made the information feel more accessible and easier to digest. Additionally, during our workshops, **practitioners emphasised the benefit of having resources in different formats**, allowing them to integrate learning into their daily routines more effectively. For example, podcasts were highlighted as particularly convenient because they can be listened to while performing other tasks, requiring less dedicated focus time compared to written materials.

“I do think podcasts and you know those visual things are far more interesting and engaging than a document to read [...] making it real rather than reading a document” - Intervention Worker

Practitioners also reflected on the potential of social media, and specifically LinkedIn, to disseminate information about the Child First framework to different audiences. Many practitioners felt that LinkedIn was a helpful platform to share information, examples of best practice and useful resources in a timely way. However, a few practitioners were less certain about using social media to share information, and highlighted that some social media platforms are less reliable and may spread

inaccurate information. Therefore, while social media can be a helpful tool to share information widely across networks in a way that is accessible and digestible, it is important that information sources can be trusted and have clear provenance.

“LinkedIn is great for that, seeing how other youth justice services are interpreting Child First and what they're doing with it as well, and it's given us great ideas to sort of build off. The most useful stuff has been stuff that the YJB has posted and that we've read off the back of that - for example, there was a help sheet recently.” - Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

Despite most practitioners welcoming information in different forms, managers at both services suggested that **the volume of information available to staff across different platforms and forums could at times be overwhelming**, and even cause some confusion about which information sources should be used. For example, a manager told us that they use a WhatsApp group to share research and materials from the YJB with staff at the service, but recognised that staff are very busy and were unlikely to have the time or space to read these materials. Similarly, the manager at the other service we engaged for this research suggested that the volume of information received and messaging from senior leadership and the YJB might feel contradictory for staff at times.

“We've got a youth justice WhatsApp group and I'll frequently just ping through little bits of research [...] and bits that the YJB have released [...]. I do think that perhaps across the team they're so busy in the day-to-day work that maybe they don't take time out and do those bits of reading.” - Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

“The amount of information we get, not just from the YJB but internally, [... we] get lots of other messages, and sometimes they are, I wouldn't say completely contradictory, but maybe they are to an extent [...] There's a lot of information for people to take in and it can get a bit confusing, I think, at times” - Service Manager

Based on this feedback, the YJB can further support managers to effectively prioritise how information on the Child First framework is disseminated across their service by collating information and providing clear steers on key messaging to avoid confusion and prevent practitioners feeling overwhelmed.

Working with managers to devise broad themes and clear messaging that will resonate most clearly with staff as part of ongoing collaboration with managers may be one way for the YJB to achieve this.

Recommendations

12. To support practitioners to better absorb information and integrate learning into their routines more effectively, **the YJB should continue to ensure that resources shared with services are in diverse formats** - including podcasts and visual content.

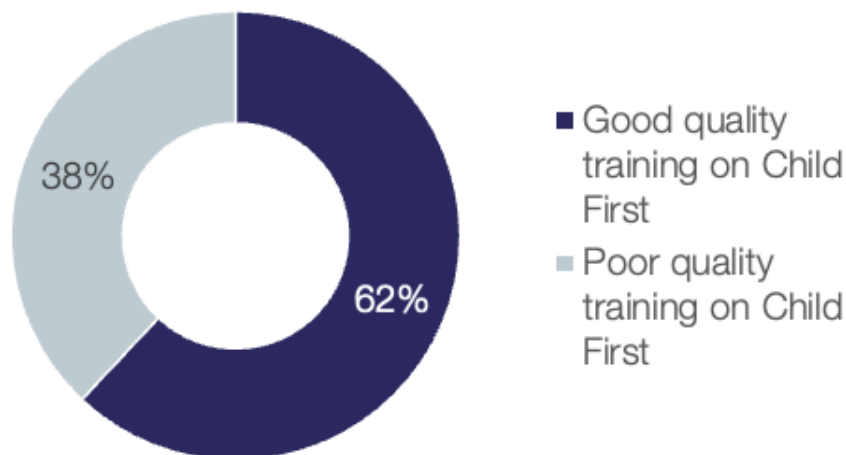
13. **The YJB should collate information and messaging to youth justice services on the Child First framework and provide clear steers on how services can prioritise this information to avoid confusion** and prevent practitioners feeling overwhelmed. Working with managers to devise broad themes and clear messaging that will resonate most clearly with staff as part of ongoing collaboration with managers may be one way for the YJB to achieve this.

Training and discussion-based learning

Practitioners found discussion-based training most effective to explore the application of the Child First framework

Alongside guidance and information, training is an important factor in practitioners' awareness and understanding of the Child First framework. Our survey asked respondents to select whether current provision around training had been a barrier or an enabler to implement the Child First framework. **The majority of practitioners (62%) felt that good quality training had been an enabler** to implementing the Child First framework. **However, the remaining third (38%) considered that poor quality/lack of training has acted as a barrier** (see Graph 14).

Graph 14: Proportion of practitioners who answered the question: In your experience, have the factors below been barriers or enablers to implementing Child First?



In our qualitative engagement, practitioners from both youth justice services talked about training they had received on broader areas of practice, some of which included explicit reference to the Child First framework in relation to these areas of practice.

Practitioners from one service additionally referenced specific training they had received about the Child First framework, although one practitioner noted that they did not receive any additional resources to support the future application of the Child First framework as an output of the training. Both youth justice services reported having opportunities (i.e. team meetings, webinars) where staff could learn about the Child First framework and how it applies to casework.

"I did learn a lot from it, I don't think there was much information in there about how to work. Well, there was information in there around how to work in a more Child First way, but nothing about resources and things like that, from what I remember" - Youth Outreach

Practitioners at the youth justice service which did not have a specific training session on the Child First framework noted that other training courses have been framed through the lens of the Child First framework which has been helpful to understand how the framework aligns with different areas of practice. For example, training on the Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool and a comprehensive three-day training on restorative justice practices. Additionally, they mentioned that, while their managers have delivered some of this training, **external experts were brought in to offer specialised insights, providing a well-rounded and collaborative learning experience.**

"We've had three-day training on restorative justice, and that was all around Child First as well as how you do it in a Child First approach. And that one was actually really, really good". - Intervention Worker

Practitioners highlighted that **having an engaging trainer, coupled with opportunities for discussion-based learning, significantly enhances the**

training experience. In contrast, **participants who had followed self-guided learning courses reported that they found them to be of limited value**, as they lacked interactive elements and real-time engagement. During the workshop, participants also discussed the pros and cons of webinars as a method for learning and development. Practitioners were in broad agreement that, while webinars can be convenient and accessible, they may lack the two-way dialogue and dynamic learning environment that many find helpful for fully grasping learning material.

“I think it was the interactiveness of it. It got my attention [...] because he was such a good trainer, he kept your attention all the time, and you were included in it. [...] It was all discussion based and made you actually think about things” - Intervention Worker

“It was a lot of learning by yourself, and then you do a test at the end. And for me, personally, I thought I learned better when it's face to face training, not online, not someone going through the PowerPoint” - Youth Outreach

Practitioners' preference for discussion-based learning offers helpful insight when considered alongside findings that information on the Child First framework and other guidance and updates can sometimes create confusion or feel overwhelming. Youth justice services should explore the option of holding discussion-based sessions to review guidance and information on the Child First tenets and implementation to give practitioners the opportunity to ask questions, share experiences and feel confident in the application of the framework.

Recommendations

14. Further training was welcomed by practitioners, with discussion-based sessions preferred by most practitioners. Given the cost and travel limitations associated with in-person training, **services should consider holding discussion-based sessions to review guidance and information on the Child First framework** to give practitioners the space and opportunity to ask questions, share experiences and feel confident in the application of the framework. YJB 'Developing Practice Fora' in England and Hwb Doeth in Wales may provide a good platform for discussions at a regional level.

Section 4: Implementing the Child First framework with partners

Across qualitative engagement, a consistent theme was the impact and influence of partners - including police, probation, education and social care - on how effectively youth justice services are able to apply the Child First framework. Practitioners emphasised the multi-agency landscape of youth justice, and the interdependency of partnerships when working to support a child. When asked in our survey whether multi-agency partnerships currently act as a barrier or enabler to implementing the Child First framework, just over half of practitioners (56%) said that strong multi-agency partnerships with aligned priorities had been an enabler. However, the remainder (44%) of practitioners felt that ineffective partnerships due to competing priorities had been a barrier to the implementation of the Child First framework. In particular, youth justice service practitioners recognised the importance of strong partnerships to a holistic approach to working with a child, supporting long-term positive development and a rounded understanding of need.

"With us being a partnership, we've got access to people in education, health, and the police. You know, when we're looking at why these children are doing what they're doing, there's a lot of vulnerabilities and things underpinning that and it means that we can address that earlier on" - Victim Liaison Officer

Evidence from the Wales Child First Pathfinder ([2021](#)) reinforces the value of partnerships to the application of the Child First framework. There, effective **partnership working was critical to the Enhanced Case Management (ECM) approach**, and collaboration with partners enabled better understanding of cultures, processes and ways of working across agencies which supported improved communication and intelligence sharing.

The benefits of partnerships to applying the Child First framework

Strong relationships with partners have the potential to drive a more cohesive approach, aligned to the Child First framework

Reflecting on what may support partners to reach a shared understanding of the benefits of the Child First framework and how it can drive better

outcomes, some youth justice service practitioners noted that there had been some positive conversations with senior leadership across agencies. Taking the example of police partners, one manager at a youth justice service reflected that senior leaders in policing had engaged with the service on the Child First framework and understood and shared this vision for working with children. However, they noted that this understanding had not filtered down to frontline police officers – which was evident in the referrals they continued to receive from police.

“[We are having] multiple conversations with higher-up police officers who are on-board. They understand it, they get it, that's the vision they have as well. But, the officers on the ground, that's not filtering down and I would say that even comes as far as our referrals process, some of the some of the referrals we get, quite frankly, are ridiculous” - Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

Other youth justice service practitioners referenced positive steps taken to build good working relationships with partners, and the benefits that this had for collaborative working to support a child in a way that is aligned to the Child First tenets. Some practitioners referenced that good working relationships with local magistrates, judges and police officers had led to partners increasingly seeking the input of youth justice services to make more informed, child-centred decisions. For example, practitioners noted that court staff had taken steps to make the court environment less intimidating

for children, based on their advice, including allowing children to remain in the waiting room rather than enter the court room, reducing stress and prioritising wellbeing. Flexible courtroom practices such as these reflect a shift towards a more rehabilitative and destigmatising approach.

“There's very much been an open door with the courts for us to make improvements and we get a lot of good feedback from courts as well, you know from magistrates and District Judges about [where] they've made decisions based on what we've been able to tell them about the child.” - Service Manager

Similarly, on the strength of these relationships, youth justice service practitioners felt comfortable to challenge decision-making by partners where they considered it to be unduly punitive, or where it would make the application of the Child First framework difficult. In particular, practitioners referenced productive conversations with police officers following a referral or disposal where they were able to advocate for greater diversion in line with the Child First framework.

“Sometimes there is a challenge around working with different agencies. [...] Their conditions are very, very robust to a point where, you know, you question some of the rationale. And then when we've come back to them and ask them, “why did you put that forward?” [and the police say] “Oh, you know, you're right”. So it sometimes there has been a bit of different opinions around, yeah, managing risk in the community from different agencies” - Case Manager

“We do have a great relationship with the police in terms of having those discussions. Obviously, when you receive a referral, sometimes, obviously, you would have the offence and you would have the original rationale, but once we complete the assessment, you might see a completely different picture. And we are having those discussions and trying to divert where possible” - Team Manager

Similarly, practitioners from both youth justice services highlighted the benefits of having seconded staff from partner agencies embedded at their service - including seconded police and probation officers. Co-location has enabled greater appreciation of ways of working and has facilitated better understanding of the Child First framework for individuals seconded from partner agencies. However, it was acknowledged that this improved understanding does not necessarily translate to partners more broadly - i.e. beyond the seconded individual.

“I've changed my way of thinking from coming into being a seconded police constable to the youth justice service [...] it's definitely open my eyes up to what affects a child and often the things that affected them are out of their control” - Seconded Statutory Partner (Police)

Our findings suggest the positive potential for partners to bridge the gap in approach by forging stronger relationships and seeking opportunities for discussion and collaboration. An important part of this is helping partners - including police, courts and education - to see the positive outcomes associated with the Child First framework, and recognise how this approach aligns more broadly to their own strategic priorities. The YJB has an important role to play in supporting youth justice services to have these discussions with partners, and demonstrate the application of

the Child First framework across different settings. For example, the YJB could share case studies demonstrating the application of the Child First framework in different contexts - including at court, and police custody - for services to share with partners as part of a conversation about how to work together to get better outcomes for children, victims and the community. Such resources could also support a shift towards a shared language for working with children that sees partners better aligned, and will contribute to perceptions of procedural justice.

Barriers to implementing the Child First framework with partners

Differences in approach, language and strategic priorities across partners have acted as a barrier to implementing the Child First framework

The importance of effective partnerships to the application of the Child First framework is also evidenced where collaboration between partners falls short ([Case, Hampson, Nisbet, 2024](#)). A review of Lancashire's Child First Pathfinder ([2022](#)) noted that the lack of coordinated planning and resources in key areas such as schooling, counselling, mental health services, housing, and accommodation had hindered the impact practitioners are able to have on children and their future opportunities. These gaps in support impact efforts to divert children from the criminal justice system, underscoring the need for a more integrated approach across partner agencies, with better coordination at a strategic level.

Our survey results found that a majority of practitioners (60%) felt that language / terminology differences with key partners was acting as a barrier to the implementation of the Child First framework. In our qualitative engagement, practitioners highlighted the lack of a shared language or differences in terminology as a challenge to applying the Child First framework in some settings. Specifically, practitioners highlighted concerns about the language used in court

settings, which they felt may lead children to disengage, or else misunderstand the expectations and requirements made of them.

“Sometimes even the language that is spoken in court by judges - even me, as an adult, I don't understand it. So you can imagine for young people they're sitting there and they're using these big words. So, there have been times when I've had to intervene [...] because the young person may not understand what they're saying.” - Case Manager

One practitioner noted that the language used and approach taken by judges could vary significantly, with some judges treating children ‘as children’ in line with the Child First tenets while other judges have used critical or even ‘nasty’ language which is in conflict with the Child First tenets.

“Depending on who the judge is, there've been some really nice ones who have really worked in a Child First way. They've really explained it [...] and they've been absolutely lovely. But then there have been other judges that have commented saying your behaviour is a stain on your parents. Which our children don't always understand, and that was quite nasty. It was horrible to hear that” - Intervention worker

Youth justice service practitioners reflected that differences in language and terminology across partners are linked more broadly to differences in strategic priorities and approach. For example, education and policing were highlighted as important partners, but practitioners suggested that the strategic priorities and approach to working with children for both agencies appears to conflict with the Child First tenets. In particular, practitioners raised that the police focus on enforcement, which can feel misaligned with the Child First framework. An example of

this is where police may attach more punitive or offence-based conditions to an out-of-court disposal, which make supporting the child in a way that aligns with the Child First tenets difficult. However, youth justice practitioners understood that police take a different approach to managing risk.

“I think from a police point of view, we've always come from the fact of enforcement, enforcement, enforcement, where the Child First approach is very much prevention and intervention” - Seconded Statutory Partner (Police)

“When we have youth conditional cautions, there's an expectation from the police that they must have conditions that are very set around reparation, reoffending and different types of conditions. So sometimes I guess there's a challenge in how we fit Child First within that.” - Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

Similarly, youth justice service practitioners suggested that guidelines in schools could have a negative impact on the application of the Child First tenets with a focus on keeping control in classrooms, and using exclusions to manage disruptive behaviour, even where this may create additional vulnerability for the disruptive child.

“I said [to the school] I think [the child] has got educational needs [...] And then since I've gotten [the school] to agree to an assessment, they've excluded [the child] seven times so that that assessment's not happened. And we've said about the traumas [...] then they just keep excluding [them] because of [their] behaviours rather than using a nurturing approach and helping” - Interventions Worker

Settings and environments

The different settings and environments in which youth justice service practitioners are operating may also impact how effectively and confidently they are able to work with partners to apply the Child First framework. **Our survey results show that youth justice service practitioners have mixed levels of confidence applying the Child First tenets across different settings.** As outlined earlier in this report, practitioners reported higher levels of confidence applying the Child First tenets in community settings and around out-of-court disposals work than at court, in custodial settings or in work related to transition or resettlement.

Lower confidence applying the Child First tenets at court and in custodial settings may be linked in part to the nature of these environments, and the inherent limitations that they impose to applying the tenets. For example, practitioners described court settings as ‘daunting’ for children, with many aspects of this environment being antithetical to the ‘as children’ tenet. Youth courts are often housed in the same buildings as adult courts, which may feel intimidating and preclude options to make the environment more child-friendly.

“They're not child-friendly environments. You expose [children to] the Youth Courts [that are] in the building where the adult court is.” - Integrated Youth Partnership Manager

Practitioners explained that in this adult environment, some children may struggle to express themselves well, understand proceedings, or feel meaningfully engaged. In some cases, good working relationships with court staff has led to improved practice in line with the Child First tenets. For example, some youth justice practitioners described how they would inform judges in advance about specific behaviours that a

child may exhibit when nervous (such as fidgeting) so that these behaviours are not misinterpreted as disrespectful.

During our qualitative engagement, **we further explored challenges faced by practitioners to support young adults when they transition to probation from youth justice services.** Practitioners pointed out that young adults accustomed to more flexible methods in youth justice may struggle with the stricter enforcement practices they encounter when transitioning to adult services. The realities of this new environment can reinforce negative self-perceptions and risk undoing some of the constructive work to build pro-social identity.

“I've heard, you know, young adults, young people who have turned up two minutes late and literally you're getting a warning for them. That's been a big shock. So I think definitely that there's definitely more work need to be done in that area.”- Case Manager

In our survey, only 54% of youth justice service practitioners agreed that a child's strengths and capabilities are identified in transition planning. The environment may present a limitation to the application of the tenets, and is an area that should be the focus of guidance for practitioners given lower levels of confidence in this setting.

Similarly, practitioners suggested that custodial settings pose a challenge to the application of the Child First tenets. In our survey, just over half of youth justice service practitioners (56%) agreed that children are supported to fulfil their potential in secure settings, while 11% disagreed. Similarly, while 66% of managers agreed that children are able to maintain community links while in secure settings, 12% disagreed. These survey findings are supported by our qualitative engagement, where practitioners highlighted that being held in a secure environment would significantly

impact the ability of children to build a pro-social identity, as their choice and ability to pursue interests and aspirations is limited. Where secure settings are far from home, this also poses a challenge to maintaining community links and positive, pro-social relationships as part of reintegration into society.

These challenges highlighted the urgent need to rethink how youth justice services and partners can support children's personal development and reintegration while in secure settings. Without access to education, training, and meaningful social connections, children are at greater risk of reoffending and struggling with reintegration upon release. To align with the Child First framework, partners should focus on prioritising policies and practices within secure settings to increase access to education and vocational training, enhance family and community contact, and promote opportunities for personal growth. Notably, in our survey just 49% of practitioners felt that they are able to work collaboratively with staff in secure settings to effectively deliver interventions for children. As a first step, youth justice services should look to strengthen partnerships with staff in local custodial settings. The YJB can support services by setting expectations on what collaboration with custodial staff looks like, in line with the Child First tenets.

Recommendations

15. Youth Justice Services have made positive steps to build relationships with key partners and bridge the gap in understanding around the positive outcomes associated with the Child First framework. **The YJB has an important role to play in supporting services to demonstrate the broad alignment of the Child First framework with partners' own strategic priorities.** For example, the YJB could circulate resources that can be shared with partners demonstrating the application of the Child First tenets in different contexts - including at court,

secure settings and police custody - as part of a conversation about how to work together to get better outcomes for children, victims and the community.

16. The YJB should build on the successful roll out of the Child First self-assessment toolkit to bring partners together to reflect on common themes and gaps in how they currently understand and apply the Child First framework and collaboratively identify solutions.

17. At a strategic level, the YJB can continue to meet with national and regional representatives of key partner agencies to consolidate and reinforce the positive conversations happening between partners on the ground. The YJB has already taken positive steps in this direction - for example, through the development of an internal Child First Policing Position Statement to direct engagement with policing partners, as well as direct involvement in informing MOPAC's Child First Policing guidance. These actions demonstrate how strategic alignment can help embed the Child First tenets across the youth justice system and partner agencies.

Conclusion

Our research findings demonstrate significant awareness and understanding of the Child First framework among youth justice service practitioners, as well as high levels of confidence in the application of the four tenets, particularly in out-of-court and community settings. Insight from children supported by youth justice services echoes this, with a majority of children reporting feeling supported, understood and listened to by adults at the youth justice service, with opportunities to be involved in planning and kept informed of decisions that affect them.

The YJB plays an important role in sharing information and materials to drive this awareness and understanding among youth justice service practitioners and partners. Our findings provide insight on the types of information and guidance that practitioners have found most useful and engaging - with a focus on clear and accessible formats, and discussion-based learning.

To further drive effective implementation of the Child First tenets across youth justice settings, guidance and information should accurately reflect some of the challenges that practitioners can face - including partnership working in court and custodial settings, working with children on short orders and in complex cases, and limited space to collaborate and engage. There are also opportunities to build on existing pockets of good practice to strengthen relationships with partners - including police, education, courts and probation - and enable a consistent and coordinated approach to the application of the Child First framework which recognises shared outcomes across partners.

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Annex

Annex A: Survey Response Data

Practitioners Survey

Crest used a non-random voluntary response sampling for the practitioners' survey, relying on the Youth Justice Board's network to disseminate the survey. A total of 238 youth justice service practitioners responded to the survey. Table 2 summarises the proportion of responses by demographics, role and time in the role.

Table 2: Proportion of responses to the practitioners' survey

Category	Sub-category	Proportion of the population
Gender	Female	77%
Gender	Male	22%
Ethnicity	White	89%
Ethnicity	Black	6%
Ethnicity	Mixed	3%
Ethnicity	Other	2%
Region	West Midlands	14%
Region	South East England	13%
Region	Greater London	13%
Region	Yorkshire and the Humber	11%
Region	South West England	10%
Region	North East England	9%
Region	North West England	9%
Region	East Midlands	8%
Region	South of England	7%

Region	Wales	4%
Region	East of England	2%
Role	Youth Justice Service Practitioner	59%
Role	Managers	31%
Role	Statutory partners	11%
Time in the youth justice service	Over 5 years of experience at the youth justice service	65%
Time in the youth justice service	Between 1 and 5 years of experience at the youth justice service	25%
Time in the youth justice service	Less than a year of experience at the youth justice service	10%

Children's Survey

Crest used a non-random voluntary response sampling for the children's survey, relying on youth justice services to disseminate the survey. A total of 59 children responded to the survey; after cleaning, 6 responses were removed as the responses were incomplete. Therefore, 53 responses were used in our analysis. Table 3 summarises the proportion of responses by demographics, role and time in the role. Please note that some age categories have been aggregated to ensure anonymity.

Table 3: Proportion of responses to the children's survey

Category	Sub-category	Proportion of the population
Gender	Female	17%
Gender	Male	83%
Age	14-15 years old	24%
Age	16 years old	30%
Age	17 years old	28%
Age	18 to 24 years old	17%
Ethnicity	White	47%
Ethnicity	Black	17%
Ethnicity	Mixed	17%
Ethnicity	Asian	9%
Ethnicity	Other	9%
Region	Greater London	42%
Region	North West England	21%
Region	East Midlands	11%
Region	South East England	8%
Region	North East England	6%
Region	East of England	4%
Region	West Midlands	4%
Region	Wales	4%
Region	South of England	2%
Region	Yorkshire and the Humber	No responses
Region	South West England	No responses

Time in the youth justice service	One month or more	96%
Time in the youth justice service	Less than a month	2%
Time in the youth justice service	I am no longer at the youth justice service	2%

The table below sets out demographic data on the proportion of children cautioned or sentenced, year ending March 2023 ([Youth Justice Board, 2024](#)) to contextualise our sample size in comparison to the overall population of children in the youth justice system.

Table 4: Proportion of children cautioned or sentenced, year ending March 2023

Category	Sub-category	Proportion of the population
Gender	Girls	13%
Gender	Boys	81%
Gender	Unknown	6%
Age	13 years old	8%
Age	14 years old	15%
Age	15 years old	21%
Age	16 years old	26%
Age	17+	31%
Ethnicity	White	69%
Ethnicity	Black	11%
Ethnicity	Mixed	10%
Ethnicity	Asian	5%
Ethnicity	Other	2%

Ethnicity	Unknown	4%
Region	Greater London	17%
Region	North West England	12%
Region	East Midlands	9%
Region	South East England	12%
Region	North East England	4%
Region	Eastern	10%
Region	West Midlands	10%
Region	Wales	5%
Region	South of England	4%
Region	Yorkshire and Humber	11%
Region	South West England	7%

Annex B: Venn Diagram Workshop Activity

During in-person workshops with youth justice service practitioners, we held an activity called 'Venn Diagram', in which we asked practitioners to categorise a series of statements based on their understanding. The statements related to the Child First framework, Trauma-Informed Practice and / or Restorative Justice Approaches.

The purpose of the activity was to understand how practitioners conceptualise these different frameworks and approaches, and explore areas of perceived overlap and difference. All statements were drawn from guidance produced by the YJB and resources found in the YJB Resource Hub.

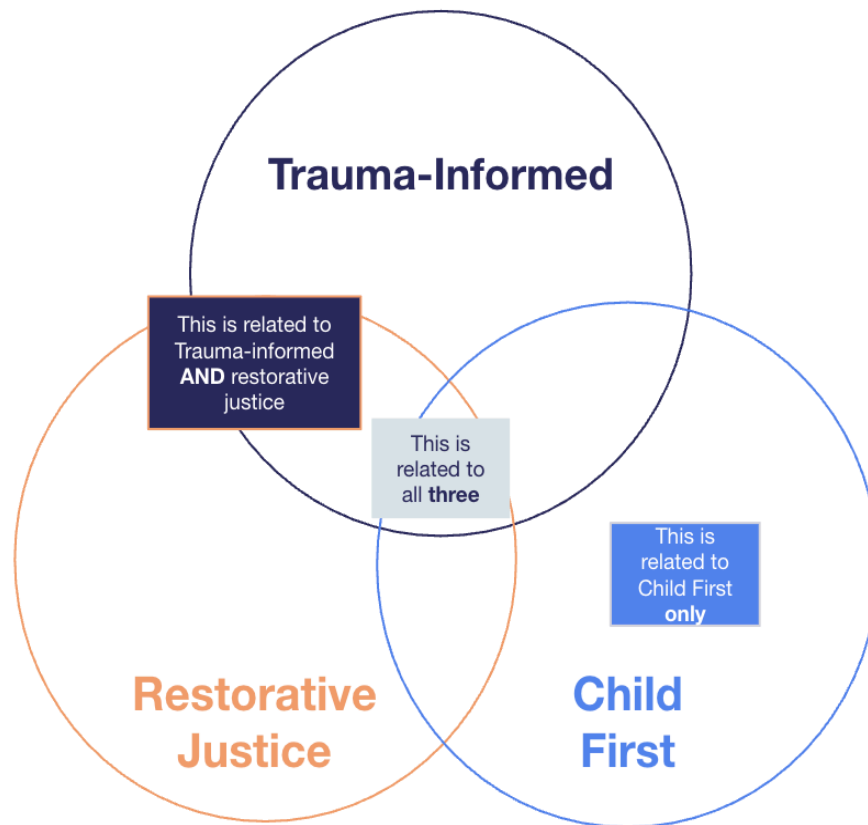
The statements were:

- Promotes children's individual strengths and capacities
- Acknowledges the needs of the child
- Involves the child in the decision-making process to tailor the intervention
- Minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system
- Emphasise accountability and making contributions to society
- Recognise the impact of ACEs on behaviour
- Gives the child a sense of control and empowerment
- Acknowledges structural barriers and meets responsibilities towards children
- Prioritises understanding and addressing through psychology responses to trauma
- Encourages dialogue to repair harm and rebuild relationships
- An overarching framework that encompasses approaches that can be implemented within it

The resources referenced for this activity were:

- [A guide to Child First \(YJB, 2022\)](#)
- [Trauma and ACE \(TrACE\) Informed Reparative Work \(Cwm Taf Youth Offending Service, n.d\)](#)
- [Why Enhance Case Management is 'Child First' \(YJN, 2020\)](#)

Figure 14: Venn diagram representation shown during the workshops with two youth justice services



Annex C: Infographic showed to practitioners during workshops

In workshops, we aimed to understand practitioners' views on the current guidance and information sources shared by the Youth Justice Board (YJB). In the first session, we asked practitioners to reflect on an infographic and share how helpful they found it in their role, using a scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.'

The infographic we showed them was:

