

Youth Justice Board

Assessment in context:
Learning from the
implementation of the
Prevention and Diversion
Assessment Tool (PDAT)

January 2026

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Executive summary

Context

In April 2024, the Youth Justice Board introduced the Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool (PDAT). The PDAT is mandated for all cases that are subject to [diversion and out-of-court interventions](#), while it is optional for cases that are considered [prevention](#). The tool was developed with consultation with a number of key partners, including front line practitioners, academics, HM Inspectorate of Probation and others. Its main aims were to:

- Standardise assessments for children involved in prevention/diversion in Youth Justice Services (YJSs).
- Promote practice alignment with the Child First decision-making framework.
- Support consistent and proportionate assessments.
- Facilitate the collation of national-level data for children involved in prevention/diversion in YJSs.

The functionality of Case Management Systems (CMS) was outside the scope of this evaluation. However, it was difficult to separate them from practitioners' experiences of using the PDAT, so they are reported here where they affected how practitioners interacted with the tool.

The report and evaluation reflect the experiences of youth justice practitioners in different roles across regions in England and Wales, using various CMS developed by different providers at a specific point in time. The evaluation was not designed to be a technical assessment of CMS performance, but to understand how services implemented new arrangements at different stages of rollout. Although not the main focus of the evaluation, the role of CMS is presented here because they shaped how practitioners experienced the implementation of the PDAT.

Some CMS changes may also have taken place since the interviews were conducted.

These findings may be useful to CMS providers now and in the future, for this or other assessment tools. They are presented as lessons and general learning about IT and implementation, offering feedback for all suppliers to consider in future updates to the PDAT or similar tools.

Methods

This study was a qualitative learning review based on in-depth engagement with five YJSs. It explored not just whether the PDAT works, but how and why it shapes practice in different contexts. The evaluation focused on two overarching questions:

1. To what extent is the PDAT achieving its intended changes to practice and improving the experience of staff and children?
2. What can be learned to improve the tool and guidance for the future?

Across the five YJSs, we spoke to:

- 10 children
- 39 YJS practitioners
- 13 YJS managers

Key findings

The evaluation found that the PDAT has begun to shift practice in positive ways, particularly around strengths-based, child-led assessment. At the same time, challenges remain around proportionality, accessibility and IT, with experiences of roll-out varying depending on leadership, training and local culture. The table below summarises the main areas of progress and ongoing difficulty.

What is working well?	Where do challenges remain?
The PDAT supports child-led, strengths-based assessment and collaborative planning	The PDAT can feel lengthy and repetitive, especially for lower-need cases
Practitioners feel more able to involve children and families in shaping plans	Abstract or technical language can make some sections feel less child-friendly
In some YJSs, it has strengthened contingency and exit planning	Accessibility and IT issues (e.g. in Case Management Systems) limit ease of use
Learning from the PDAT is influencing statutory casework	The quality of implementation varies, influenced by training, leadership and local culture.

Children valued:

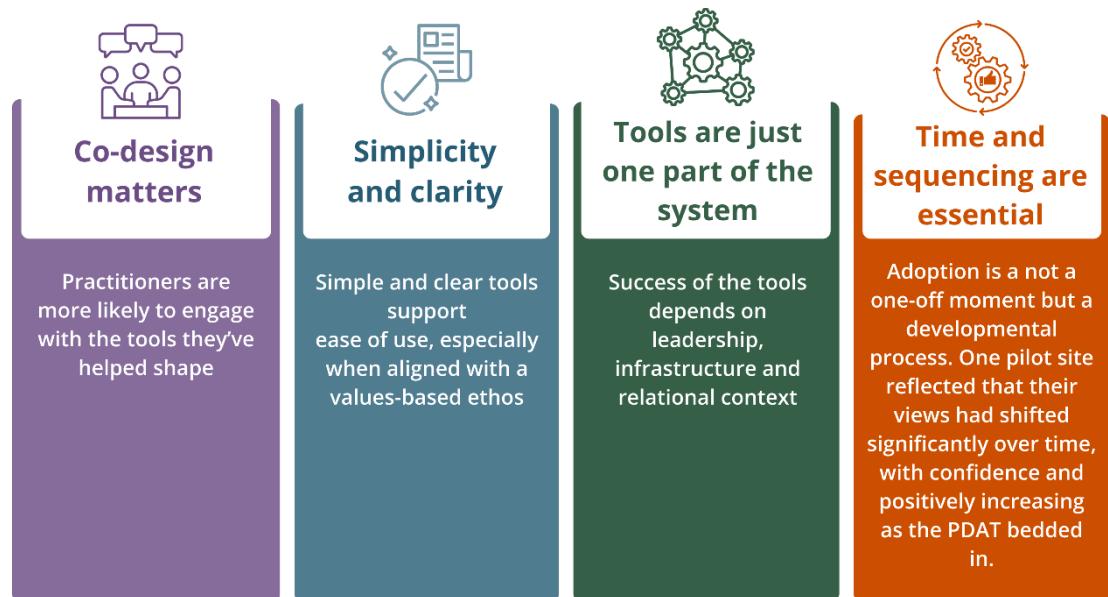
Informal, trust-based conversations over formal assessments, which made them more willing to open up.

Co-created plans that reflected their strengths, needs, and goals, giving them ownership of the process.

Child-friendly formats, such as visual or interactive plans, which made goals more engaging and accessible.

Cross-cutting lessons

Alongside specific insights about the PDAT, the evaluation surfaced broader lessons about tool development and roll-out. These lessons underline that: co-design matters; simplicity and clarity are essential; tools sit within a wider system; and time and sequencing shape adoption.



Recommendations roadmap

A summary of all recommendations is below. They are structured by group and categorised as short-term (quick wins), medium-term and long-term (strategic). Full recommendations are available in Annex Two.

	YJB	YJS leaders	YJS practitioners	CMS providers
Short-term	Promote QA document as shorter guide	Embed PDAT guidance into supervision/team meetings	Share feedback on PDAT usability for further escalation	Fix usability issues
	Incorporate prompts into PDAT Word doc	Escalate CMS issues to CMS providers		
Medium-term	Facilitate peer learning across YJSs	Lead consistent Quality Assurance processes Link into local networks	Use professional judgement to tailor assessments proportionately to each child's context Use child-friendly plans with children and families	
Long-term	Apply PDAT learning to future tool development (e.g. co-design future tools with neurodivergent practitioners)	Sustain cultures of reflective practice beyond roll-out	Apply PDAT learning across all assessments	Provide ongoing support to YJSs

Reader's guide and key terms

This section provides the key information needed to navigate the report. It includes abbreviations used throughout, definitions of core terms and a brief guide to the report's structure.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout this report:

Abbreviation	Term
CMS	Case Management System
PDAT	Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool (we recognise that different areas use different abbreviations; we use PDAT throughout this report)
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
YJB	Youth Justice Board
YJS	Youth Justice Service

1 Definitions

These definitions have been drawn from the Youth Justice Board's [guidance](#).

Prevention

Prevention refers to early or targeted work with children who may be showing signs of vulnerability, or whose circumstances mean they could become involved in offending without additional support. It focuses on addressing unmet needs, promoting positive development and reducing the likelihood of contact with the formal youth justice system.

Diversion

Diversion applies where a child has come to the attention of the police or Youth Justice Service in relation to an offence, but where it is considered more appropriate to respond through an alternative pathway that avoids formal criminal justice processing. Its aim is to prevent the stigma and long-term impact of a criminal record while still ensuring that any underlying needs are identified and addressed.

“How to read” guide

- Section 2 summarises the experiences of children who had recently been assessed using the PDAT.
- Sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 explore what staff from Youth Justice Services (YJSs) told us about their experiences of implementing the PDAT and offer recommendations for what this could mean for practice and policy going forward. Where relevant, these sections also include reflections from children to illustrate how the PDAT is experienced in practice.
- Section 2.4 provides a dedicated space for children’s voices, drawing together their views in more depth.
- Section 2.5 brings the report to a close with concluding reflections, highlighting what learning from the PDAT might mean for the wider YJS landscape.

Findings throughout the report are grounded in evidence gathered through consultation with staff in five different YJSs across England and Wales, as well as YJB representatives involved in developing the PDAT. To protect anonymity, we have used pseudonyms for the five participating YJSs: **Southmere, Elverton, Penlow, Brickleigh and Caerton**.

The report does not reflect every view or experience of working with the PDAT. Our aim was not to make broad claims about how the tool is being received. Instead, we focused on understanding **why** people felt the way they did. This helped us to explore the conditions that support or challenge good practice, and to identify learning that can lead to improvement. While this is

not a final verdict on the PDAT, it is a learning moment that offers tools, tips and considerations for how its impact can be strengthened across the youth justice system.

To make this rich and sometimes complex learning easier to navigate, we have structured the report chronologically, starting with what was in place before the PDAT, through to its roll-out, usage in practice and emerging impacts. This structure allows us to tell the story of the PDAT so far, while weaving in key lessons and areas for improvement at each stage. These lessons are translated into practical, actionable recommendations, which are targeted at three distinct groups: YJS practitioners, YJS leaders and the YJB. All of these recommendations are also presented together in a single summary table in **Annex 3** for ease of reference.

For detail on how the YJB developed the PDAT, please refer to **Annex 2**.

Breakdown of participants

The five YJSs were purposively selected in consultation with the YJB to reflect a broad spread of contexts. Selection was based on geographical coverage across England and Wales (including both rural and urban areas), varied caseload demographics, differing HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) inspection results relating to out-of-court resolutions assessment, and a mix of PDAT early adopter and newly engaged sites. Within each YJS, the evaluation team engaged with children, case managers and operational managers to capture examples of good practice and to explore emerging issues.

Annex 1 provides further information about the recruitment of participants.

Pseudonym YJS area	Children (n)	Practitioners (n)	Managers (n)	Total (n)
Brickleigh	2	8	1	11
Caerton	3	8	3	14
Elverton	2	7	2	11
Penlow	2	6	2	10
Southmere	1	10	5	16
Total participants from YJSs	10	39	13	62
YJB representatives	-	-	-	2
Total	-	-	-	64

2 Children's experiences

We spoke to ten children who had recently been assessed using the PDAT. This section provides an overview of what they told us, showing how the PDAT supported children to feel heard, co-develop their Plans and work towards their goals. More details on the recruitment of children can be found in **Annex 1**.

First meetings with YJS practitioners

- ✓ Children found it easier to engage when first meetings felt informal and personalised.
- ✓ They found it easier to open up when practitioners showed a genuine interest in them and tried to understand things from their perspective.

How were Plans developed?

- ✓ Children had worked with their practitioners to co-create tailored Plans which focused on their wellbeing, hobbies, education and careers.
- ✓ When children could see that their Plan reflected their needs, they felt more engaged, supported and confident.

Sharing Plans with the children and their families

- ✓ Some children had access to copies of their Plans, others didn't.
- ✓ Some children didn't remember whether they'd seen their Plan but did remember their goals which had been communicated verbally, via call or text message.

How the assessment made children feel

- ✓ Children felt supported by the Plans in place.
- ✓ They spoke positively about their work with the YJS post-assessment. Many reported greater self-awareness, better emotional management and a more hopeful outlook.

Note: In the PDAT, the “Plan” section is co-created with the child (and often their parent/carer) to set out agreed goals, actions and support. It is strengths-based, written in child-friendly language and may include contributions from practitioners, the child and their family.

Children's experiences of the PDAT reflect the [Child First decision-making framework](#), which emphasises building supportive, strengths-based relationships. Evidence shows that when children feel heard and involved in shaping their plans, they are more likely to engage positively, avoid stigma, and progress towards better outcomes.

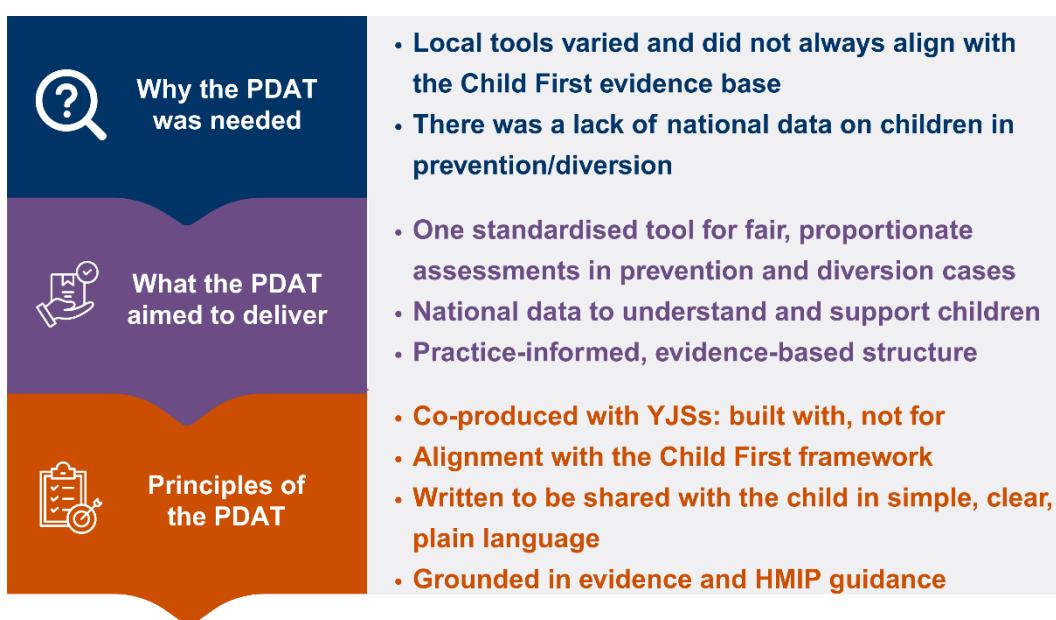
3 Lessons from the PDAT

3.1 What was the landscape before the PDAT?

Before the PDAT, YJSs in England and Wales used a variety of locally developed assessment tools for children on their caseload for prevention and diversionary outcomes. Consultation with staff from the YJB and individual YJSs revealed that these approaches often reflected local priorities and worked well for individual services at a local level. However, they created inconsistency and made it difficult to build a clear, national picture of prevention and diversion.

Figure 1 outlines the key reasons the YJB cited for introducing the PDAT, what it aimed to deliver and the principles that shaped its development. This section as a whole describes the diversity of existing tools, drivers for change, the PDAT development process and how the PDAT is aligned with the Child First decision-making framework.

Figure 1: Overview of the PDAT



📌 A note on Child First

Child First is the evidence-based framework which supports practice in the youth justice system in England and Wales. It is made up of four tenets, based on evidence, that together emphasise that reduced offending and ultimately safer communities and fewer victims are achieved through seeing children as children, recognising their rights and potential, and supporting their pro-social development through inclusive, non-stigmatising approaches.

In this report, we do not link the PDAT to specific tenets individually because different elements of the tool relate to different aspects of the Child First

framework in different ways. For example, the emphasis on collaborative planning supports collaborating with children, while the tool's child-friendly language and strength-based framing help practitioners see and support children as children and build pro-social identity. Its use in prevention and diversion contexts also aligns with diverting from stigma.

Rather than map the PDAT against individual tenets, this report treats it as a tool that aligns with the Child First decision-making framework as a whole.

3.1.1 Diverse and evolving assessment tools

YJSs across England and Wales reported that before the PDAT was introduced, they had developed their own local assessment tools to support prevention and diversion work. In some cases, these tools had grown from adaptations of [AssetPlus](#)¹. YJSs honed their assessment tools over time to reflect local priorities, styles of working and the needs of the children they supported.

Practitioners generally viewed these tools positively. Many described how their local approach had been shaped through experience and continuous refinement. This sense of ownership was important. Tools felt familiar, adaptable and, crucially, aligned to their ways of working.

However, this diversity also brought challenges, as PDAT leads from the YJB highlighted. The lack of a consistent approach across areas led to differences in how assessments were carried out. It was also difficult to gather comparable data nationally, making it hard for the YJB to build a clear picture of the children being supported through prevention and diversion.

At the same time, the wider policy and practice landscape had shifted with an increasing emphasis on aligning practice with the Child First decision-making framework. Locally developed tools had not necessarily been designed with the four tenets of the Child First decision-making framework in mind. As a result, these tools risked reinforcing outdated approaches that may not fully align with the evidence base on what works to improve child outcomes, reduce reoffending, make communities safer and reduce the number of victims of crime.

3.1.2 The case for a new approach

According to [research](#) undertaken by the YJB in 2023, the scale of prevention and diversion work being delivered by YJSs was significant. While the sector showed strong commitment to this area, it also faced notable challenges:

1. Prevention and diversion work was not being captured in a standardised way.

¹ AssetPlus is the YJB's standard assessment and planning framework. It is used for statutory cases and differs from the PDAT, particularly in: language around safety and well-being, with the PDAT placing greater emphasis on family needs, building on strengths, including one plan with subsections and including an exit plan ([PDAT guidance, 2024](#)).

2. There was inconsistent funding and recognition.

The PDAT was developed in direct response to these challenges. It aimed to bring greater consistency to assessment practice, ensure alignment with the Child First framework and improve understanding of the characteristics of children being supported through prevention and diversion.

The YJS sector broadly stood in support of this:

- **Practitioners** showed recognition that this new tool was needed, particularly to ensure a proportionate approach would be taken for each child based on an understanding of the child's strengths and needs.
- **The YJB** wanted a standardised tool which would be aligned with the evidence base and could lead to collation of national-level data to help characterise children involved with prevention and diversion.

"It's a lot easier to make a change when you're doing what people have asked for."

PDAT lead from the YJB involved in PDAT development

In summary, a consistent tool which would support quality and proportionality across England and Wales was needed, and as a result, the YJB worked with the sector to develop the PDAT.

3.1.3 Building something with, not for, the sector

The PDAT was developed by the YJB with support from YJS sector. As PDAT leads from the YJB told us, co-production and shared ownership were foundational principles of the PDAT's development. Figure 2 details the key principles involved in developing the PDAT.

Figure 2: Key principles behind the PDAT development



"The sector gave very generously."

YJB partner involved in PDAT development

PDAT leads from the YJB told us that practitioners were clear in what they wanted the PDAT to look like. They required a tool which was simple, short (~seven pages), linear and written in plain language that would make sense to everyone including children and families.

3.1.4 Laying the foundations for consistent, Child-First practice

[The YJB's Strategic Plan \(2021-2024\)](#) set out a clear ambition: to build a youth justice system that is Child First (i.e. underpinned by the Child First framework to reduce offending and make communities safer). As previously noted, that means placing children's strengths, needs and lived experiences at the centre of decision-making, and ensuring they are supported through proportionate approaches which build supportive relationships and divert them away from the formal criminal justice system wherever possible.

The PDAT was developed, in part, to help bring that ambition to life. By providing a practice-informed, evidence-based structure for assessment, it aimed to support fair and balanced planning, helping practitioners to get the 'dosage' right (i.e. meeting each child's needs without over-intervening).

For the YJB, this was a chance to offer a practical tool that embeds the Child First framework from a child's earliest point of contact with the youth justice system.

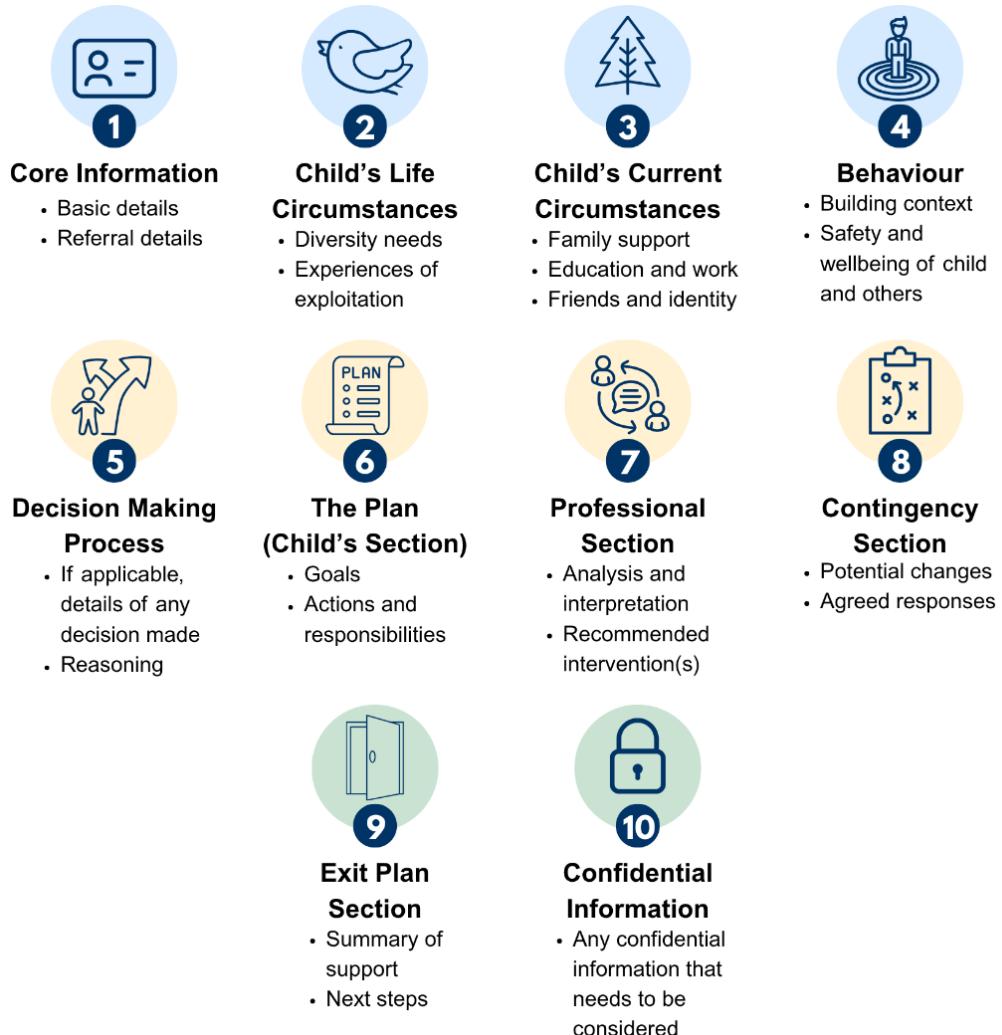
"The ethos of the tool [PDAT] matches the current research and understanding that currently exists."

PDAT lead from the YJB involved in PDAT development

3.1.5 How the PDAT looks

The development process led to the creation of the PDAT which is used across YJSs. It is structured into 10 sections. The visual summary in Figure 3 provides an at-a-glance summary of the PDAT's structure.

Figure 3: The PDAT at a glance



3.1.6 Learning and recommendations

Figure 4 outlines key recommendations drawn from the learning presented in Section 3.1. These recommendations focus on enhancing the process of developing tools like the PDAT, ensuring they are both effective in practice and aligned with the Child First framework.

Figure 4: Recommendations based on learning

Recommendations for YJB	Balance national consistency with local flexibility by identifying which PDAT fields must be standardised for data purposes, while allowing local services to adapt non-core elements (e.g. Plan presentation) to fit children's needs.
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	<p>Build in structured co-production with YJS practitioners and managers as a standard part of tool design.</p>
<p>Recommendations for YJS leaders</p> 	<p>Reinforce the PDAT's role as a practice tool in training and supervision, highlighting how it should support rather than replace professional judgement and relational approaches.</p> <p>Support staff in recognising the practical benefits of adopting a shared national tool (e.g. comparability, data for inspections, improved consistency).</p>
<p>Recommendations for YJS practitioners</p> 	<p>Approach the PDAT as a framework to guide proportionate, relational conversations with children, while applying professional judgement to tailor the depth of assessment to the child's context.</p> <p>Contribute actively to feedback loops with leaders and the YJB to ensure practice insights continue to shape refinement of national tools.</p>

3.2 How was the process of rolling out the PDAT?

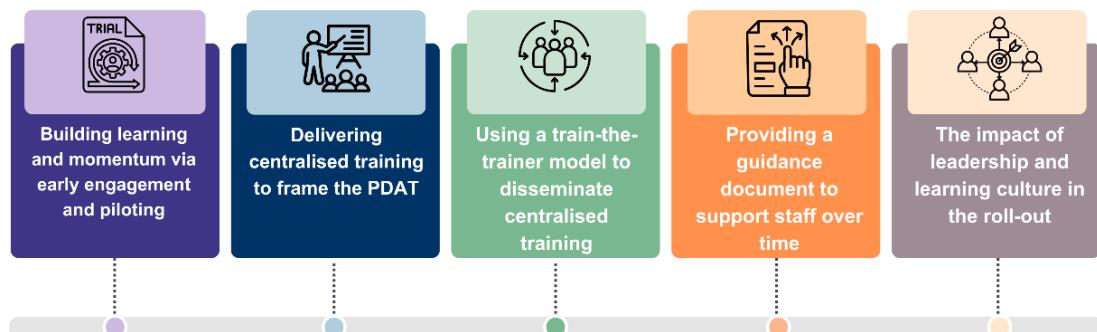
Rolling out the PDAT has been a significant project for the YJB. The work involved in implementing and embedding the tool has also been a major undertaking for YJSs across England and Wales.

“It’s the biggest change in any Youth Offending Team since AssetPlus was introduced in 2015.”

Manager from Penlow YJS

This section explores how that roll-out looked, from early piloting and centralised training to the use of guidance materials, the role of leadership and the practical impact of IT systems. It draws on diverse experiences to highlight what supported effective implementation, where challenges arose and what can be learnt for the future. Figure 5 summarises the main steps taken as part of the PDAT roll-out.

Figure 5: Key aspects of the PDAT roll-out



3.2.1 Building learning and momentum via early engagement and piloting

One of the YJSs we consulted with, Penlow, piloted the PDAT. This means they worked closely with the YJB, implementing the PDAT in their service and supporting the YJB to refine the PDAT.

In Penlow YJS, where managers described their service’s ‘can-do’ attitude, the pilot experience was positive. Managers valued the open, two-way nature of their dialogue with the YJB, which included sessions to present the draft PDAT and a period of trialling the tool. During this time, staff were encouraged to raise questions, log issues and suggest changes, such as developing a QA document to accompany the PDAT. This allowed them to feel part of an iterative process, driving a sense of shared ownership. It also helped the YJB to ensure the PDAT was practice-driven and fit-for-purpose ahead of wider roll-out.

“We never felt isolated or unsure of what PDAT was.”

Manager from Penlow YJS

3.2.2 Delivering centralised training to frame the PDAT

Once the PDAT had been finalised, the YJB delivered a series of two-day regional workshops to introduce the PDAT to two representatives from every YJS in England and Wales. PDAT leads from the YJB told us that the training aimed to familiarise staff with the tool, reinforce core assessment principles and promote alignment of practice with the Child First framework.

The YJB's intention was that rather than offering step-by-step instruction, the training would support reflection and professional judgement. The underlying assumption was that those attending would already have the skills to assess children and didn't need to be guided through each section of the form.

Some YJS staff reported that communication about the training felt last minute, and that practicalities such as the two-day format, travel requirements and local capacity made it challenging for members of staff to attend. Attendees were a mixed group, often selected simply on the basis of who had capacity to attend rather than who was best placed to support local roll-out. As a result, attitudes towards the training and views on its usefulness shared by staff from YJSs were mixed. These did not appear to depend on participants' role or seniority.

Some attendees described the training as excellent, welcoming the opportunity to reflect on the Child First framework.

"It felt like back-to-basics training and a good refresher."

Manager from Southmere YJS

Others felt it did not provide the practical guidance they felt they needed to implement the PDAT in day-to-day practice. Several said they would have benefited from a walkthrough of each section of the tool, especially given the variation in experience in undertaking assessments among staff.

"We thought all our questions would be answered on how to use it [the PDAT] but it was a general training on how to engage with young people, and we already knew all that."

Practitioner from Brickleigh YJS

This suggests that the YJB's assumptions about baseline skill level may not have fully accounted for the diversity of roles and experience levels in assessing children specifically across the sector. Moreover, delivering centralised training to a mixed group can make it difficult to pitch the content at a level that meets everyone's needs.

There were also sequencing challenges. The PDAT was trialled and first used in Word format, before being uploaded to Case Management Systems (CMS). YJSs

transitioned from Word versions to CMS versions at different speeds. Because each YJS was at a different stage of rolling out the PDAT when the training took place- from early exposure to the PDAT in Word format to embedding it within their CMS - participants arrived at the training with varying levels of knowledge and readiness.

The next stage of the roll-out relied on these attendees taking the lead in training colleagues locally. As the next section explores, this approach had mixed results.

3.2.3 Using a train-the-trainer model to disseminate centralised training

The YJB adopted a train-the-trainer approach, with the expectation that those who attended regional sessions would disseminate learning within their own services. This approach was intended to be flexible, giving each YJS the space to tailor internal roll-out to suit their local YJS structure and needs.

However, the model produced uneven and unpredictable results. In some areas, local dissemination was well organised and thoughtfully delivered, whilst others struggled to make time to deliver sufficient training locally. For example, Southmere YJS led a two-day internal training using real cases and scenario-based discussion to walk colleagues through each PDAT section. In Elverton the internal roll-out was proportionately tailored to local needs, being intentionally brief (around half a day) because managers and practitioners felt confident that their existing practice already reflected a Child First approach. This confidence, affirmed by managers, meant they viewed the central training as covering familiar ground and therefore, did not see the need for a more extensive internal programme. Elsewhere, internal roll-out was more limited, with some YJSs only offering brief overviews due to time pressures or struggling to find any time to formally introduce the PDAT.

A key challenge was the variations in who attended the centralised training. For instance, where YJSs selected the attendees they were sending based on who was free rather than who was best placed to support internal dissemination, this led to mixed experiences. While some attendees arrived engaged, skilled and ready to cascade learning, others questioned the value of the training and showed limited engagement. As one trainer reflected, this raised concerns:

“It’s worrying when disengaged people are the ones taking it back to their teams.”

PDAT lead from the YJB involved in PDAT development

The model also relied on an assumption that attendees had both the skills and capacity needed to train others and the understanding to answer questions about the PDAT. In practice, this was not always the case. As a result, practitioners responsible for implementing the PDAT have expressed frustration, reporting that they have not been equipped with the tools or support needed to use it confidently and effectively.

"If we were trained on this [the PDAT], we could make it work."

Practitioner from Caerton YJS

One YJS told us they had received some training with a focus on the PDAT from an external training provider. While this training took a different approach to the training provided by the YJB, working through the PDAT section by section, practitioners said they still felt confused and did not feel their needs had been met. It is important to note that the YJB did not support or accredit any external provider to deliver PDAT training, so it is unclear whether this session reflected the PDAT as designed or the way it was intended to be used.

3.2.4 Providing a guidance document to support staff over time

Alongside the PDAT, the YJB published a detailed [guidance document](#) to support its use. The intention was to offer practical support including prompts, explanations and reflective tools that could strengthen professional judgement and help embed the tool in day-to-day practice.

Practitioners who allocated the time and space to engage with the guidance described it as a comprehensive and confidence-building resource. Several referred to the guidance as their “bible”, especially when navigating more complex assessments or reflecting on unfamiliar sections of the PDAT. The guidance was particularly valued in services where it was used actively in supervision, team discussions or learning spaces rather than simply being made available.

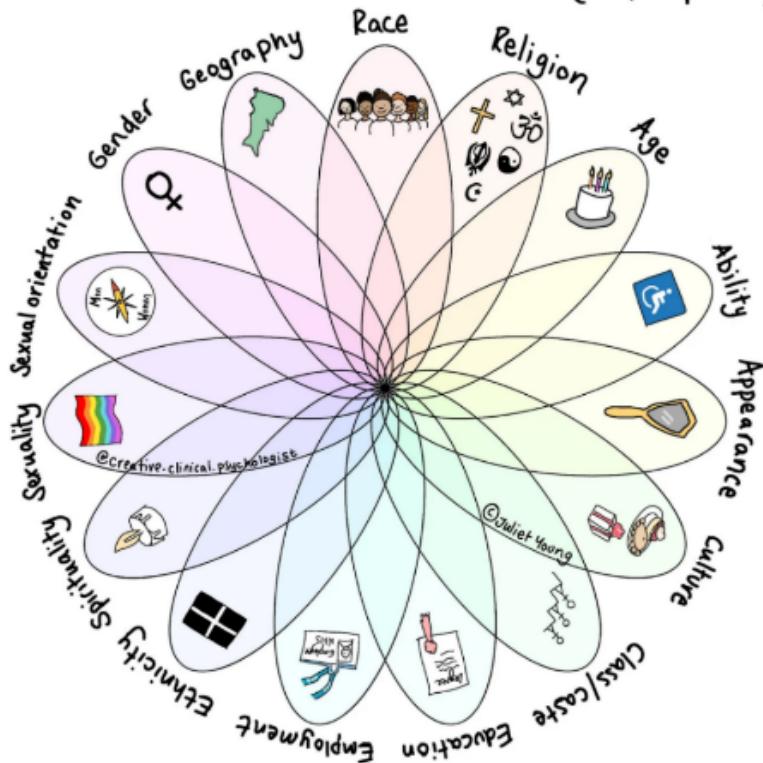
One of the most frequently praised elements was the inclusion of practical prompts and frameworks. These helped practitioners deepen their analysis, clarify purpose, and maintain a child-centred approach. For example:

- Guidance on balancing descriptive and analytical content helped practitioners move beyond simply reporting events to making meaning of children’s experiences.
- The Social GRACES tool (Figure 6) was valued for helping practitioners understand how children see themselves, identify needs linked to aspects of their identity and structure conversations that build on their strengths.

Figure 6: The GRRRAACCEESSS

Social GRRRAACCEESSS

(Burnham, 2012)



Practitioners who reported limited engagement with the guidance also tended to describe feeling less confident using the PDAT and, in turn, expressed less positive views about it. While this does not necessarily indicate a direct causal link, it suggests that active use of the guidance helps build familiarity and confidence with the tool.

In the case of more experienced practitioners and managers, views on the guidance varied. Some felt they did not need to refer to the guidance unless a case was especially complex. Others found the guidance a helpful prompt and source of inspiration to return to, even if they felt confident with using the PDAT itself to assess a child.

Despite these strengths, staff identified some barriers which limited their capacity to engage with the guidance:

- Time pressures made it difficult to read and digest the full document.
- Some found the guidance too long or text-heavy, particularly neurodiverse staff.

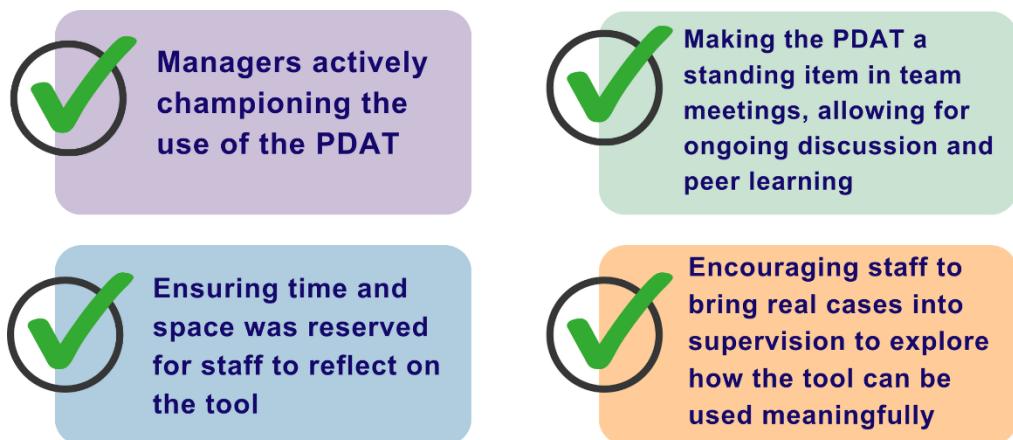
- In some services, there was no formal expectation or support to engage with the document.

Overall, the guidance is a highly valued resource for many practitioners, which is most impactful when it is built into practitioners' routines and learning spaces.

3.2.5 The impact of leadership and learning culture in the roll-out

While formal training and guidance have played an important role in implementation, the attitudes within YJSs have also determined how well the PDAT has become embedded. Across the services we consulted, it was clear that strong leadership and supportive supervision alongside a culture of continuous learning had a significant influence on how the PDAT was understood and applied in practice. Figure 7 provides examples of steps taken in YJSs where staff reflections on PDAT roll-out were more positive.

Figure 7: Factors which contribute to a positive implementation culture



In areas such as Penlow, this helped move the PDAT from being “just another form” to a shared way of thinking and working. Practitioners in these areas were more likely to describe the tool as useful, particularly when they felt safe to explore challenges and ask questions without fear of judgement.

By contrast, in YJSs where the roll-out has felt more fragmented and leaders have been less engaged or supportive of the PDAT, staff were more likely to report confusion about how to complete the tool and what its purpose was, or to express low confidence in using it. Without leadership support, there was little opportunity to embed the tool into everyday practice, and the PDAT remained something for practitioners to grapple with on their own.

Importantly, this was not only about individual line managers. In areas where staff reported feeling more confident and positive about using the PDAT, there was a wider culture of reflective practice, where experimentation, questioning and discussion were encouraged. Leaders modelled this by engaging with the tool themselves and promoting open conversations about what was and was not working (e.g., in team meetings and line management meetings).

3.2.6 The role of IT and CMS in supporting roll-out

Alongside training and guidance, IT and Case Management Systems (CMS) played a major role in shaping staff experiences of PDAT roll-out. Figure 8 summarises the challenges staff told us about, covering both Word and CMS versions of the tool.

We include these challenges only where they affected the operational efficiency of YJSs or the timeliness and quality of assessments. Some of the challenges raised by interviewees may relate to CMS providers rather than the PDAT framework itself. However, it was not always possible to separate these during analysis, as the IT systems strongly influenced how practitioners experienced the PDAT day to day.

The report and evaluation reflect the experiences of youth justice practitioners in different roles across regions in England and Wales, using various CMS developed by different providers at a specific point in time. The evaluation was not designed to explore CMS use or compare systems, but to understand how services implemented new arrangements at different stages of rollout. Although not the main focus of the evaluation, CMS issues are presented here because they shaped how practitioners experienced the implementation of the PDAT. Some CMS changes may also have taken place since the interviews were conducted.

“In [the CMS], it’s hard to collate information because you can’t have other windows open at the same time. It’s a poor version and it looks unfinished and feels like a trial version. There are lots of spelling mistakes.”

Practitioner from Caerton YJS

Figure 8: Challenges with format of the PDAT

Theme	Applies to		Description
	Word	CMS	
Disjointed flow	✓	✓	Some staff stated that the PDAT lacks a clear, linear structure, making it feel incohesive or scattered.
Drop-down menu issues	✓	✓	The menus have a large number of options and its design in the CMS makes it difficult to see all the options. Similarly, the drop-down menu often misfunctions in the Word version.
Unreliable saving		✓	As the CMS can be slow to save, in some cases data has been lost.
Locked submissions		✓	Once finalised online, some staff reported that assessments cannot be reopened or edited, meaning practitioners delay uploading until just before deadlines, which increases time pressures.

Practitioners described the CMS they were using as feeling unintuitive and outdated. They highlighted difficulties in collating information from various sources where the system does not allow multiple windows to be open and reported that unreliable saving sometimes resulted in data being lost. Errors and inconsistencies in the platform's design, such as spelling mistakes, further undermined confidence. Managers described the migration to the CMS as highly disruptive, with the process extending timescales and adding new administrative burdens.

These problems meant some staff continued to complete PDAT assessments in Word before transferring them into a CMS. At times this has added to the perception that the tool was time-consuming and cumbersome. Practitioners also raised concerns that once assessments were uploaded into their CMS they became locked, preventing them from being revisited or amended. Staff felt this was at odds with the reality of assessments, which are often built up gradually and revisited over time.

While staff recognised that many of these issues reflect the wider IT and CMS environment rather than the design of the PDAT, they emphasised that such problems undermined morale and confidence during the early stages of roll-out. They also pointed out that services themselves have had to absorb the costs of securing and adapting new case management systems, which was a particular concern for managers.

These findings suggest actions not only for the YJB and YJSs, but also for CMS providers. In particular:

- Prioritising stability and usability; addressing slow saving and navigation.
- Simplifying interface design.
- Providing consistent support.

3.2.7 Learning and recommendations

Figure 9 presents a set of recommendations informed by the learning in Section 3.2, with a focus on strengthening the implementation and embedding of tools like the PDAT in practice.

Figure 9: Recommendations based on learning

<p>Recommendations for YJB</p> 	<p>Ensure future training blends theory and practice, with reflective learning and walkthroughs tailored to experience levels, and guidance on distinguishing description from analysis to cut duplication.</p> <p>Differentiate training sessions where possible so that managers, experienced staff and newer practitioners each get what they need.</p> <p>Continue to promote the guidance and embed key prompts into the PDAT which help practitioners differentiate between where description vs analysis are needed.</p> <p>Communicate more clearly how the QA document can be used as a shorter, practitioner-friendly guide alongside the full guidance.</p>
<p>Recommendations for YJS leaders</p> 	<p>Lead by example: engage with the PDAT and guidance directly and support reflective use in supervision and team meetings.</p> <p>Support internal rollout by offering in-house training or walkthroughs of completed PDATs.</p>
<p>Recommendations for YJS practitioners</p>	<p>Use the guidance actively in supervision and peer learning, making particular use of prompts that help to analyse children's experiences and</p>

	<p>structure conversations in a child-centred way.</p> <p>Contribute feedback on training and guidance to support ongoing refinement of the tool.</p>
<p>Recommendations for CMS providers</p> 	<p>Address usability problems highlighted by practitioners, including slow saving and overly complex drop-down menus.</p> <p>Resolve incidents of typos and the PDAT misaligning with the original Word document format.</p> <p>Provide consistent support to YJs during migration processes.</p> <p>Respond promptly to issues escalated by YJs and provide clear routes for feedback.</p>

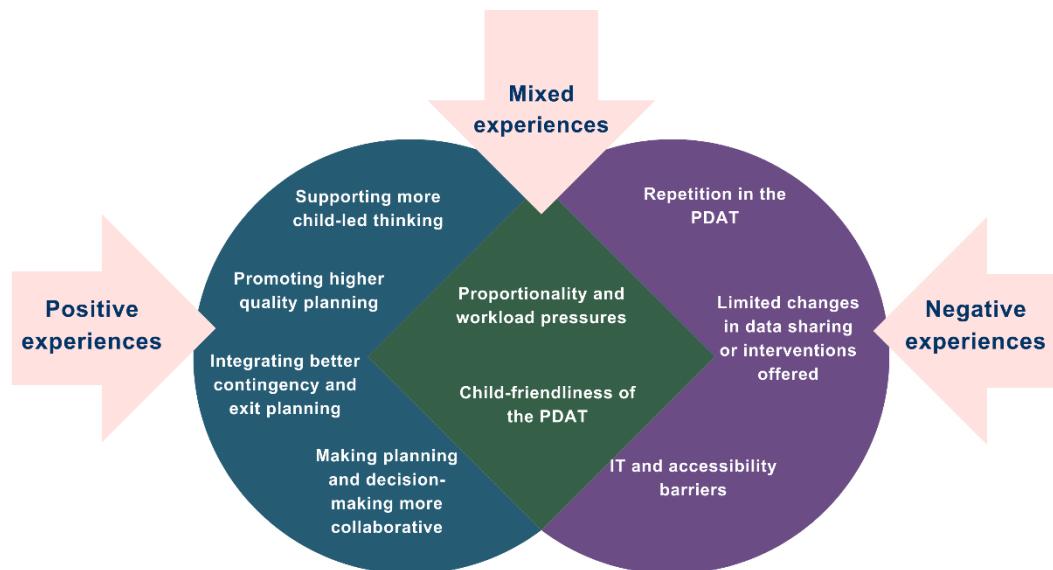
3.3 How is the PDAT shaping conversations and planning?

At the time of our consultation, the PDAT was broadly implemented across YJSs. Staff shared examples of how it has prompted more child-led, strengths-based conversations and improved collaborative planning. However, these benefits have been tempered, sometimes significantly, by persistent IT and accessibility challenges. Across services, practitioners described the technical barriers linked to the PDAT's format and integration into Case Management Systems (CMS) as one of the most substantial obstacles to using it effectively. These issues were not isolated or minor: for many, they shaped day-to-day workflow, reduced efficiency and undermined morale.

While some staff viewed the PDAT as a valuable addition to their toolkit, others said the ongoing technical challenge, combined with the tool's length and complexity in some contexts, limited its potential to improve practice. This section explores where the PDAT has supported better conversations and planning but also examines in detail the systemic and technological barriers that continue to restrict its impact.

Figure 10 summarises the key reflections shared by staff when talking about the PDAT.

Figure 10: Summary of staff reflections on the PDAT



3.3.1 Making assessments more child-led

Practitioners in Penlow and Southmere said the PDAT has helped shift their mindset, with its move away from risk-focused language prompting more holistic and child-friendly assessments. They highlighted that the PDAT's emphasis on exploring diversity and discrimination has encouraged them to consider a broader range of factors when working with children. This shift has carried over into their AssetPlus work, where child-friendly terms and concepts from the PDAT have been shaping how they write the assessment.

“Our language has changed. If we are working with a child on a court order, I tend not to use the word ‘risk’ anymore but use the words ‘behaviour’ and ‘safety of others’ rather than saying ‘risk to others’. We are now used to asking questions around diversity and discrimination and these are big changes to AssetPlus because of working with this new tool.”

Practitioner from Penlow YJS

Case managers in Southmere echoed this, observing that frameworks such as the Social GRRRAAACCEESSS, introduced to them through the PDAT, are increasingly reflected in the way AssetPlus assessments are written. For the children we spoke to, this has meant having a feeling that their YJS practitioner has genuinely wanted to get to know them, providing reassurance that their worker was interested in them as a person and helping them feel comfortable to open up.

3.3.2 Supporting collaborative planning

A note on the Plan

As Figure 3 shows, the sixth section of the PDAT is called The Plan (Child’s Section). It captures the child’s strengths, identifies where they may need support and sets out the key steps the child and others will take to help them achieve their goals and stay safe.

Practitioners described how the PDAT has changed the way they approach planning, making it more collaborative and accessible for children and families. The *Plan* section, in particular, has prompted staff to involve children and parents more actively in shaping goals and next steps, and to communicate plans in ways that feel engaging and understandable.

In Penlow, practitioners have created their own interactive, child-friendly version of the *Plan*, which allows children to write, draw and use rating scales (e.g., to convey how they are feeling). Practitioners felt this not only improved engagement but also gave children more ownership over the process.

Practitioners in Southmere and Penlow noted that the PDAT guidance has supported better planning by deepening their understanding of each child’s context. Tools such as the Social GRRRAAACCEESSS framework (Figure 6), genograms and prompts on structural barriers have helped staff explore family dynamics and social environments more confidently, strengthening their ability to advocate for children, including, where necessary, challenging police decisions.

"I definitely feel like I've got better at challenging other partners and using certain terminologies, especially the police."

Practitioner from Southmere YJS

This suggests that embedding structured prompts and frameworks into guidance can enhance collaborative planning.

YJS leaders noted that the PDAT's explicit focus on strengths, compared to previous assessment tools, has contributed to more constructive and positive planning with children. A service manager from Brickleigh described this shift as helping practitioners work with children to build on what is going well, rather than focusing solely on problems or safety concerns.

3.3.3 Integrating better contingency and exit planning

Practitioners in Southmere, Penlow, and Elverton described the PDAT as making contingency (i.e., planning ahead for possible changes in a child's circumstances or needs) central to the assessment process. This is in contrast to other assessment tools, where they noted that this often feels like a tick-box exercise. Senior leadership support was seen as crucial in embedding this shift.

In Penlow, for example, training and guidance from managers helped practitioners approach contingency planning in a more focused and strategic way. Managers reviewing PDATs through QA noted that practitioners were articulating clearer, more streamlined plans for what should happen if things went wrong. Practitioners also said that the PDAT itself helps to structure this thinking, prompting them to hone in on potential issues emerging over the course of the assessment rather than treating contingency as an afterthought.

However, experiences were not consistent. Early Help practitioners in Southmere who have been using the PDAT and YJS practitioners in Brickleigh reported struggling with the contingency section. They explained that completing this section well requires specialist knowledge, such as understanding complex risk factors like exploitation, knowing how to identify and plan for possible changes in a child's circumstances and being confident in applying the right terminology. In contrast to the tool that Early Help practitioners had used previously, they perceived the PDAT as a more complex, specialist tool which feels less intuitive for staff with less experience in the youth justice system. These challenges appear to reflect training and knowledge gaps in parts of the sector, rather than weaknesses in the PDAT itself, as staff in other areas reported feeling confident in working on the same section.

Exit planning was viewed more consistently as a positive feature of the PDAT. Practitioners felt it had made the process more focused and collaborative, and in Elverton, staff highlighted good practice in sharing exit plans with the police through the tool. While some case managers felt the section mainly improved record-keeping, practitioners described it as adding clarity and structure to their end-of-case planning with children and families.

3.3.4 Making *Plans* meaningful for children and families

Sharing the PDAT

A note on sharing the PDAT

The guidance states that the PDAT is designed to be shared with children and families, except for the confidential section at the end. This includes *The Plan* (the sixth section of the PDAT, as shown in Figure 3), which sets out agreed goals, actions and safety steps.

Approaches to sharing the PDAT varied across the YJs we spoke to. Southmere routinely shared the full PDAT, including the *Plan*, with children, while Penlow developed its own visual, child-friendly version of the *Plan*. Other services preferred to summarise *Plans* verbally, via calls or texts, especially where they felt the written format felt too formal for children or potentially anxiety-inducing for parents/carers.

Staff in Southmere told us that although writing directly ‘to’ the child was initially challenging, positive feedback built the staff’s confidence. They found that sharing *Plans* improved transparency, involved parents more closely and created a greater sense of accountability for practitioners to deliver on agreed actions. Staff emphasised, however, that flexibility is essential: practitioners need space to use their professional judgement to decide whether to share *Plans* in full, adapt them into child-friendly formats, or share key points verbally, depending on the needs of each child and family. Some suggested building in features such as colours or pictures to make the written *Plan* feel more appropriate for children.

Barriers to sharing the PDAT

Approaches to sharing the PDAT with children and families were often shaped by their views on how child-friendly and accessible the PDAT feels. Staff in Penlow and Southmere saw the PDAT as an improvement on existing assessment tools such as AssetPlus; more concise, better aligned with the Child First framework and easier for children to understand.

Others, particularly in Caerton, Elverton, and Brickleigh, described sections of the PDAT as intrusive or overly formal, with a prescriptive tone that, in their view, risked making conversations feel procedural rather than relational. While practitioners did not specify particular sections, they linked these concerns to anxieties about sharing the PDAT directly with children, worrying that the level of written detail could feel overwhelming or even risk re-traumatising children by presenting sensitive information “in black and white.” Some of these challenges related to the language used. Practitioners highlighted difficulties with abstract or unclear terminology, including *structural barriers* and *special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)*, which were sometimes replaced locally with terms like “barriers” or “additional needs.”

Across services, practitioners proposed three broader improvements to address child-friendliness and engagement challenges:

- Clear prompts alongside key questions, helping staff frame sensitive or abstract topics without over-reliance on the guidance document.
- Reworded phrasing for complex concepts to make them easier to ask directly.
- A short, portable checklist of core themes to guide conversations, reducing disruption caused by using the full PDAT during sessions.

3.3.5 What helps and hinders?

Staff across YJSs shared a range of experiences about what supports or undermines effective use of the PDAT. Their reflections point to specific features of the tool, as well as wider factors like practitioner confidence, infrastructure and expectations. This section summarises the key enablers and barriers.

Repetition in the PDAT slows progress

Practitioners across multiple YJSs described parts of the PDAT as repetitive, with overlapping questions that slowed down completion and added to workload pressures. Staff felt that some sections duplicated content unnecessarily, creating what one practitioner described as a “cut and paste” exercise rather than a streamlined assessment. Several practitioners said this detracted from the quality of their conversations with children, as they were more focused on covering each question than building rapport.

“It [repetition] really bugs me because the whole point of this tool is to stop us having to do the AssetPlus kind of comprehensive assessment and make more of an effective use of our time. I think the tool is great but there’s bits in there that could be improved still in terms of duplication.”

Practitioner from Penlow YJS

The topics where staff reported finding repetition and duplication across the PDAT were:

1. Children’s developmental needs
2. Children’s behaviour
3. Children’s strengths
4. Parental support needs
5. Types of support offered to the child

Practitioners felt these areas often overlapped across different sections, making the assessment feel longer than necessary. Further detail on the specific questions identified as repetitive is provided in Figure 11.

However, some staff noted that the apparent overlap can reflect a distinction between description and analysis, and that responding with this in mind can reduce unnecessary duplication.

[Practitioners should] just answer the question you're actually being asked rather than what you think you're being asked. Think about what's relevant where so you avoid duplication."

Practitioner from Brickleigh YJS

Figure 11: Areas of perceived repetition within the PDAT

Themes with repetition	Section	Sub-section	Questions	Issues raised by practitioners
Additional and development needs of the child	Core information	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the child's additional needs? (disability, language, neurodiversity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners thought that both the questions across 'Core information' and 'Child's current circumstances' could be clubbed into one and answered together to avoid repetition.
	Child's current circumstances	Health and wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the child have additional learning needs, including any speech and language needs, and what are they? What are the child's developmental needs and what is their maturity? 	
	The Plan	Child's Section – My Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These are the additional things we have agreed will be put in place to keep me and others safe, if needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners highlight in the sections above what the child's needs are and the support required. This section thus becomes repetitive.

Themes with repetition	Section	Sub-section	Questions	Issues raised by practitioners
Child's behaviour	Behaviour	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the assessor's opinion, what needs/goals is the child trying to achieve through this behaviour? In the assessor's opinion, why has this behaviour taken place? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners argued that both the questions could be clubbed into one and answered together to avoid repetition.
Existing strengths to support child	Child's current circumstances	Parent(s)/Carer wider family needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What strengths (for the child, their family, in the community) already exist to help the child achieve their potential? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners argued that both the questions across 'Child's current circumstances' and 'Behaviour' could be clubbed into one and answered together to avoid repetition.
	Behaviour	Moving Forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What existing strengths, for the child, family and community can be built on? What will help the child achieve their potential? 	
Support for parents to meet the child's needs	Behaviour	Moving Forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the child's family need any additional support to help to support them achieve their potential? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners stated that both the questions across 'Behaviour' and 'The Plan' could be clubbed into one and answered together to avoid repetition.

Themes with repetition	Section	Sub-section	Questions	Issues raised by practitioners
	The Plan	Professional Section	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What other support is in place and which of the child and family's needs are being addressed by this support?	
Support offered to the child	Exit Plan	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What intervention has been delivered to the child?• What support has been given to the parents/carers?• Please provide a summary of what support has been provided and what impact this has had on the child and their family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The second question on the support offered to the parents and the summary question are repetitive.

Overall, practitioners suggested that the PDAT could be made more efficient by reviewing and consolidating overlapping questions and adding clearer prompts to guide responses. This would help staff focus on capturing the most relevant information without unnecessary duplication, freeing up more time to engage meaningfully with children and families.

Proportionality remains unclear

Staff across Caerton, Elverton, and Brickleigh felt the PDAT was more demanding than their locally developed tools, describing it as “heavy-handed” for children with lower-level needs and minimal contact with other services. In Southmere, Early Help staff who mainly handle Community Resolution, Triage, and Youth Caution cases viewed the PDAT as too long and resource-intensive for their work. Some YJS practitioners echoed these concerns, particularly for Turnaround cases.

Some practitioners felt that adapting to the PDAT encouraged them to focus more on capturing detail during the assessment itself, which they worried could affect rapport with children. Others emphasised that this was not a requirement of the tool, as sections can be completed retrospectively, but reflected the challenge of adjusting to a more detailed framework.

“I’ve gone from meeting them [children] without any laptop, having a proper conversation, building a relationship and making notes later to now having to carry my laptop because what if I miss a question.”

Practitioner from Elverton YJS

Practitioners also reported that the PDAT’s length and level of detail made it difficult to meet the deadlines for completing assessments. Compared with their locally developed tools, the PDAT took longer to complete, and the deadline often did not account for the time needed to build relationships, engage children and families or manage accessibility barriers.

“The amount of information asked to add in there is a lot because we don’t have enough time and it doesn’t match up timescales.”

Practitioner from Brickleigh YJS

Senior leaders in two services offered a different view, noting that the PDAT can be tailored to the level of detail needed.

"It's a long assessment but it doesn't actually need a lot of detail for less complex children. This is a benefit - that you can make it longer or shorter based on the child."

Practitioner from Penlow YJS

However, many practitioners said they lacked clarity on what level of detail was expected, pointing to inconsistencies between PDAT guidance and the realities of frontline practice. In some cases, this was linked to managers having not attended PDAT training, limiting their ability to guide staff.

Drawing on feedback from both practitioners and managers, a number of potential ways forward were identified:

- Stronger quality assurance and case manager involvement, with managers attending centrally delivered training and providing clearer direction on expectations.
- Practical support to clarify "what good looks like", such as sit-down sessions, sample assessments or reflective discussions to reduce unnecessary writing.
- Ensuring internal completion deadlines reflect the realities of building trust and gathering information from children and families.

Practitioner skill level shapes experiences

Across services, the successful implementation of the PDAT partly depended on the skills, creativity and confidence of staff.

Practitioners described a range of creative, locally developed strategies which they have found useful when undertaking a PDAT with a child:

- **Fidget toys** for children to ensure stimulation
- **Using a child's photo** during the assessment to prompt discussion on identity and ethnicity with the practitioner also doing the same exercise in parallel
- **A document with photos of all the practitioners the child may be working with** providing information about their roles and what they would be doing with the child
- **Using identity cards** provided in the training to kick start conversations
- **Doing the 'root, tree, branches' exercise** with children (involves mapping the child's personal identity, strengths, support systems on paper)

- **Asking children to draw and colour pictures of people important to them** to uncover their support systems and key relationships

That said, Early Help staff in Southmere who have been working with the PDAT reported struggling with complex or high-needs cases due to limited specialist training, particularly in working with neurodivergent children or those with significant mental health challenges. This reflects a local skills and capacity issue, rather than a limitation of the PDAT itself, but it nonetheless shapes how the tool is experienced in practice given the realities of the landscape it is being implemented in.

“The training did not account for challenges in working with children with severe mental health issues and neurodivergence.”

Early Help practitioner, Southmere

Accessibility challenges for specific staff groups

Neurodivergent practitioners, particularly in Elverton, described the PDAT's format, especially on CMS, as a major barrier. The lack of linear flow and limited navigation they experienced made completing assessments feel considerably more time-consuming, leaving staff feeling overwhelmed and behind.

“As a neurodiverse practitioner, I feel way behind in my work... If the accessibility issues can be resolved, then I would be more onboard to use it.”

Practitioner from Elverton YJS

Teams tried to adapt by restructuring the Word version into a more linear, narrative format, but these changes could not be mirrored in the CMS version. The Word version itself also presented challenges, such as its white background making reading difficult for some dyslexic staff (manually converting each box to yellow for ease of use was time-consuming).

Many practitioners described feeling overwhelmed and under pressure as they tried to keep pace with the PDAT's introduction. Limited opportunities to raise accessibility concerns meant that problems often went unaddressed, and the requirement to upload assessments onto the CMS added further strain. Some staff felt they had little time to absorb, adapt and integrate the tool into their practice.

Practitioners said these barriers affected not only their workload but also their morale, professional curiosity and overall wellbeing. Across services, staff reported finding it harder to fully accept or engage with the PDAT because of these ongoing frustrations, despite recognising its potential benefits.

System-level barriers to sharing information and expanding interventions

The progress of the PDAT has been shaped and, in some cases, constrained by wider system-level barriers. Although the tool itself was designed to help build a clearer picture of children supported through prevention and diversion, many practitioners said it has not led to noticeable improvements in how information is shared or in the types of interventions available to children.

Staff in Southmere and Penlow highlighted persistent challenges in accessing partner systems, which limited the extent to which the PDAT could be used to generate new insights or coordinate support. These barriers reflect wider systemic issues beyond the PDAT itself, including fragmented data infrastructure and siloed service delivery. The issues sit beyond the scope of the PDAT but nonetheless affect how easily teams can share information across agencies.

Some services had found ways to overcome these barriers, for instance through co-location with partners or long-standing relationships, but these were not universal. As a result, the extent to which the PDAT enhanced multi-agency working varied.

Practitioners also explained that the range of interventions offered to children had largely remained unchanged since the PDAT's introduction. While staff were confident in their current support offer, they emphasised that broader change requires resources, service availability and partnership infrastructure. In this sense, the PDAT has strengthened existing practice, but its potential to drive earlier or more tailored support is constrained by the wider system in which it sits.

3.3.6 Learning and recommendations

Figure 12 presents a set of recommendations drawn from the learning in Section 3.3, focusing on actions that can strengthen the day-to-day use of the PDAT.

Figure 12: Recommendations based on learning

Recommendations for YJB	
	<p>Continue to emphasise proportionality in how the PDAT is used, making clear that depth of assessment should be tailored to the child's needs and circumstances.</p> <p>Co-design new tools and related resources with neurodivergent practitioners to improve accessibility and workflow.</p> <p>Continue to work with YJSs to address areas of perceived repetition within the PDAT, either by ensuring the intended differences between</p>

	<p>sections/questions are clear, or by removing areas of repetition.</p>
<p>Recommendations for YJS leaders</p> 	<p>Lead consistent QA processes to reduce uncertainty about assessment detail.</p> <p>Provide sit-down support sessions for staff to share PDAT experiences and reflect on practice challenges.</p> <p>Escalate persistent CMS or system usability issues directly to CMS providers.</p>
<p>Recommendations for YJS practitioners</p> 	<p>Use interactive formats (e.g. child-friendly plans or visuals) to make planning meaningful and accessible.</p> <p>Choose how to share the PDAT (in full, adapted or verbally) based on what works best for the child and family.</p>

3.4 What difference is the PDAT making for children?

The children we spoke to were from five YJSs across England and Wales. This is not a complete picture of every child's experience, but it offers valuable learning by exploring how and why certain approaches helped children feel involved, heard and supported.

Some children felt more comfortable having their parent/carer present during their conversation with the research team. Where relevant, we have included quotes from those parents/carers. To protect anonymity, names and identifying details have been changed.

Overall, the children had positive experiences of assessments using the PDAT. They appreciated the informal, relaxed nature of their conversation with the practitioners. Where practitioners used fidget toys and creative tools, children said that it helped them to feel comfortable. In reality, children were often unaware that an assessment was happening.

While some children had seen their written assessment, others had not. This was child specific rather than location specific. The reasons behind this are explored in Section 3.3.4.

3.4.1 What children valued in their first meeting with their YJS practitioner

“

*It felt like a chat and more personable.
I liked it.*

Isla (Elverton YJS)

Part of the first meeting between a child and their YJS practitioner involves information gathering to inform the PDAT. All of the children we spoke to described their first meeting with the practitioners as feeling like an informal chat or a 'get to know you' session. This meant that children often did not feel like they were being formally assessed. Children told

us this approach helped them to feel relaxed and open to speaking to their YJS practitioner.

Feeling that their YJS practitioner genuinely wanted to get to know them

Children appreciated when practitioners started conversations by asking them about their hobbies, interests and what they like to do in their free time. This reassured them that the practitioner had a genuine interest in understanding them and their situation, which helped them to feel safe to open up.

“

She was talking to him rather than at him.

Elliott's mother (Caerlton YJS)

“

She asked me what things I was interested in. It did not feel like a serious meeting. She gave me fidget toys which helps. It went quickly and [we] formed a good relationship quickly.

Isla (Elverton YJS)

One child's mother agreed with her child, explaining that it made her feel good knowing that their child was prioritised.

Feeling that their YJS practitioner wanted to understand things from their point of view

“

I spoke everything that I needed to say, and I was very comfortable that she sat there and listened to me. She was able to understand what I was saying and where I was coming from.

Ben (Penlow YJS)

It was important to children that practitioners showed them that they wanted to hear their story in their own words. This included understanding the factors that led to them becoming involved with the YJS. This made them feel comfortable and heard.

Children felt that their practitioner was trying to help them to feel more positive about their current situation and support them with their future. This made them feel that they could be honest and share what they wanted to focus on during their time with the YJS, with an emphasis on building towards their goals rather than revisiting past experiences.

3.4.2 Developing and sharing plans with children and families

Collaborative development process

Plans were developed by practitioners along with children, with the aim of supporting children to explain their goals and make a plan to achieve them. Children shared their goals with their practitioners. These often related to mental wellbeing, hobbies, support required in school or career choices.

“

It was all about the positive influences in his life, identifying what he was good at and bringing out the positive rather than focusing on the negative.

Elliot's mother (Caerton YJS)

“

I did ask to get help with working on my anger as I am known to be a relatively angry person and get angry easily and my mum also said that I get anger issues so she [the practitioner] planned around that.

Ben (Penlow YJS)

Practitioners helped children to identify their strengths, as described by the mother of a child.

Plans were then developed in line with children's goals. The topics children told us they were focusing on included:

- The impact of consuming drugs and alcohol
- Emotion and behaviour management
- Developing hobbies
- Achieving academic and career goals
- Improving/strengthening important relations
- Ensuring your own safety

Sometimes plans incorporated steps that other people (e.g., YJS staff, school staff, parents/carers) would take to support the child to reach their goal. Children

and some parents spoke positively about this process, stating that they found it collaborative and felt confident that goals were helpful and achievable.

When children and parents/carers had contributed to the development of the plan and the plan considered the child's needs, such as incorporating walk and talk sessions to accommodate SEND needs, children felt positive about their involvement with the YJS.

Sharing plans with children and their parents/carers

“

She [case manager] talked to me about it and I saw the booklet, the green plan and it said step by step what I would do, what my goals were and what course I would be doing. I was happy about the plan.

Ben (Penlow YJS)

As Figure 13 shows, across different areas there were differences in how plans were shared with children.

Figure 13: Children's experiences of accessing their Plans

Area	Did children have access to their plans?
Brickleigh	Children mentioned that they had not seen their Plan and did not know what was included in it, but they knew that they would see their YJS practitioner on a regular basis.
Caerton	Two out of three children had not seen their Plan. The YJS practitioner kept these two children and their parents updated via calls and texts, which they found sufficient to understand the next steps.
Elverton	Two out of three children had not seen their Plan. The YJS practitioner kept the two children and their parents updated via calls and texts, which they found sufficient to understand the plan and next steps.
Penlow	The child had access to their Plan.
Southmere	The child stated that they did not remember reading or knowing about their Plan, but they were aware of the goals they would be working towards during their time with the YJS.

Where one child had access to the service's own version of their plan, the plan was child-friendly and interactive, including icons and visuals. Children could draw in the plan to show their interests, with simple questions to help them think about what they would like to achieve through the plan.

In another service, children were also offered the chance to view their plans. One child declined, preferring to work directly with their psychologist. Another, unable to access the plan due to system issues, received weekly updates instead, which made the information more manageable.

3.4.3 What the PDAT meant for how children spent their time with the YJS

I did ask to get help with working on my anger, and we did sessions on anger, alcohol and drugs. I liked the calming my nerves exercise we did for my anger.

Ben (Penlow YJS)

Children reported feeling able to work towards their goals, drawing on their plans. One child who had worked on managing anger found the topics covered in their sessions particularly helpful.

Now I am thinking more before doing something. Before I did not think before doing or saying something but now, I realise there are consequences.

Tyler (Southmere YJS)

Many children felt more positive and hopeful about their futures, with some describing improved self-reflection and awareness.

Overall, speaking to children highlighted that their experiences of the PDAT aligned with the principles of the Child First framework. Their YJS practitioners recognised their individual needs and strengths, supported development in self-awareness and helped children to build pro-social identities through co-created, goal-oriented plans.

3.4.4 Learning

Key elements of practice are presented in the list below. These are drawn from children's reflections presented in Section 3.4, which supported their understanding of the assessment process and encouraged active participation. This includes the recommendation to develop a short, child-friendly explainer video to help ensure children know they are being assessed and feel empowered to shape the process.

Learning from children



- **Informal, relational approaches foster trust.** Children respond best when assessments feel like natural conversations. Tools like fidget toys, drawing activities or relaxed chats help them feel safe and open, even when being assessed.
- **Collaborative planning empowers children.** When children and families co-create their Plan, focusing on strengths, goals and concrete next steps, it boosts motivation, builds ownership and strengthens the child-practitioner relationship.
- **Plans need to be shared flexibly.** Children engage better when plans are shared in ways that suit them: visually, verbally or in writing. Flexibility in format helps ensure the content is meaningful, accessible and child-friendly.
- **Alignment with the Child First framework is visible in practice.** Children feel more supported and hopeful when practitioners show genuine curiosity, centre their perspective, and build plans that reflect their strengths and goals. This affirms the impact of Child First working.
- **A short explainer video** may help outline what the PDAT is, why it matters and how children can shape the conversation and their Plan. The video could be shared before or at the start of the process to help demystify the assessment and promote meaningful engagement.

3.5 What does this mean for the wider YJS landscape?

The PDAT roll-out provides more than just a case study for implementing a new assessment tool. It offers a window into the conditions that enable or hinder meaningful practice change across the youth justice system. As the PDAT becomes further embedded, the lessons learned from its design, introduction and use highlight both the potential for tools to drive culture change and the systemic barriers that must be addressed for meaningful practice change to be realised.

This concluding section distils what the PDAT experience tells us about the wider YJS landscape: how tools can help integrate the Child First framework into day-to-day work, where there is appetite for simplification and unification, the system-level factors that influence success and the value of strengthening peer learning. It also considers how these insights can shape the development and delivery of future tools, ensuring they are not only well-designed but also supported by the infrastructure, leadership and partnerships needed for effective implementation.

3.5.1 Using tools to help integrate the Child First decision-making framework into practice

Practitioners and managers across different YJSs described how working with the PDAT had sharpened their practice in line with the Child First decision-making framework. In particular, they described how the language in the PDAT encouraged them to frame conversations using child-friendly language, and how the questions relating to children's self-identity have re-shaped their approach when talking to children. These are promising signs that the PDAT has encouraged strengths-based, relational and individualised assessments.

For practitioners working across both statutory and prevention and diversion cases, it is likely that this learning is permeating across to statutory casework. A manager from Penlow commented that, although two full days of training felt intensive, the time spent "felt really affirming" and encouraged them to think more creatively about their practice and how to embed the Child First decision-making framework in their approaches.

This suggests that the PDAT has already influenced broader professional culture within youth justice service provision. This evaluation demonstrates that assessment tools can have a ripple effect when they create space for reflection and reinforce the Child First framework.

At the same time, maintaining fidelity to these principles is important if the benefits are to be sustained. In some YJSs, practitioners have adapted certain terms in the PDAT to make them feel more familiar, for example, replacing "special educational needs and disabilities" (SEND) with "additional needs" or shortening "structural barriers" to "barriers." While these changes can make the tool more accessible locally, they can also narrow its scope. Substituting SEND can miss important learning, sensory, emotional, or mental health needs, while dropping "structural" from "barriers" shifts attention away from systemic factors, such as policies, norms, or services, that shape children's opportunities and

outcomes. Over time, such changes could limit the PDAT's ability to capture a truly holistic picture.

Looking ahead, there is also scope to strengthen alignment with the Child First framework by involving children directly in shaping future tools. Co-designing assessments with children would not only ensure the language and concepts are meaningful and accessible to them, but would also model principles from the Child First framework in practice by treating children as active partners in the system. This could help embed the relational ethos of the PDAT more deeply and create tools that both practitioners and children recognise as supporting child-centred engagement.

3.5.2 Appetite for simplification and unification

Staff from across the five YJSs recognised that the PDAT was developed to work within the YJS landscape and the updated evidence base. Because AssetPlus was developed at an earlier moment in time, this opens a gap between the two assessment tools.

Several practitioners questioned the need for separate tools for prevention and diversion and statutory work. Some suggested that, with further development, the PDAT could evolve into a single assessment framework suitable for all cases.

Staff from both Penlow and Southmere YJSs highlighted key aspects of the PDAT they particularly value and find superior to AssetPlus:

- The PDAT's planning section was praised.
- The linear sequencing of the PDAT was valued because it results in an easy-to-read assessment.
- The strengths-based framing of the PDAT was noted.

However, there was also recognition of PDAT's limitations. Practitioners in Elverton felt the tool was not yet suited to more complex cases or those involving exploitation, while Southmere noted that practitioners from Early Help using the PDAT had struggled with some of the language used.

These reflections point to an emerging appetite for a unified assessment framework that is flexible, proportionate and grounded in shared values. The YJB's ongoing review of AssetPlus presents a timely opportunity to integrate what practitioners have found valuable in the PDAT, ensuring that every child assessed by a YJS is supported through a process that reflects consistent practice in line with the Child First framework.

3.5.3 System-level factors which can support or inhibit progress

It is important to recognise that the PDAT has been rolled out into a complex system comprised of YJSs spread across England and Wales. The roll out process has underlined that the context in which these individual YJSs is functioning affects the success. Four key enablers emerged as critical:

1. **Practitioner skill level:** Wide variation in experience and confidence was evident across the teams delivering prevention and diversion work and hence using the PDAT. As one manager put it, “*There are differing levels of experience across the team, so staff need different levels of guidance.*”
2. **Leadership buy-in:** In some areas, strong operational management combined with a commitment to adapting to a new tool has supported effective roll-out. In contrast, especially where senior leaders did not attend the training, knowledge transfer was limited and practitioners in these areas expressed concern that their managers didn’t fully understand the tool, leaving them feeling unsupported. As another manager put it, you “*Need to have someone who understands youth justice... [who] is experienced who can understand and deliver the training.*”
3. **Partnerships:** Information-sharing and intervention pathways remain heavily reliant on local relationships. Penlow’s co-location with Early Help and fostering teams was seen as an enabler, while Southmere noted delays in getting information from schools or health professionals which could undermine timely assessments.
4. **IT infrastructure:** This was consistently flagged as a barrier, especially by neurodivergent practitioners. Caerton described the PDAT on their CMS as “*a poor version*” of the PDAT including typos and some challenges around functionality. Staff in Elverton and Southmere described workarounds, such as completing PDATs in Word before uploading to the CMS to avoid system constraints. Cost implications for integrating the PDAT into CMS systems had not always been anticipated or supported.

Staff efforts to improve efficiency and reduce stress have resulted in re-ordering of questions and other adaptations to the tool. These adaptations raise concerns about fidelity of the tool, its ability to meet the accessibility needs of all practitioners and to ensure standardisation in practice – one of the core aims for introducing PDAT. There is a need to address accessibility issues in both the formats to ensure staff wellbeing and effective practice.

Learning from these enablers and barriers is key, as is recognising that assessment tools cannot necessarily drive change in isolation. They can, however, nudge the system towards positive change, such as embracing the Child First framework, especially when they are supported by investment in infrastructure, leadership, practitioner development and partnership working.

3.5.4 Strengthening peer learning and cross-YJS dialogue

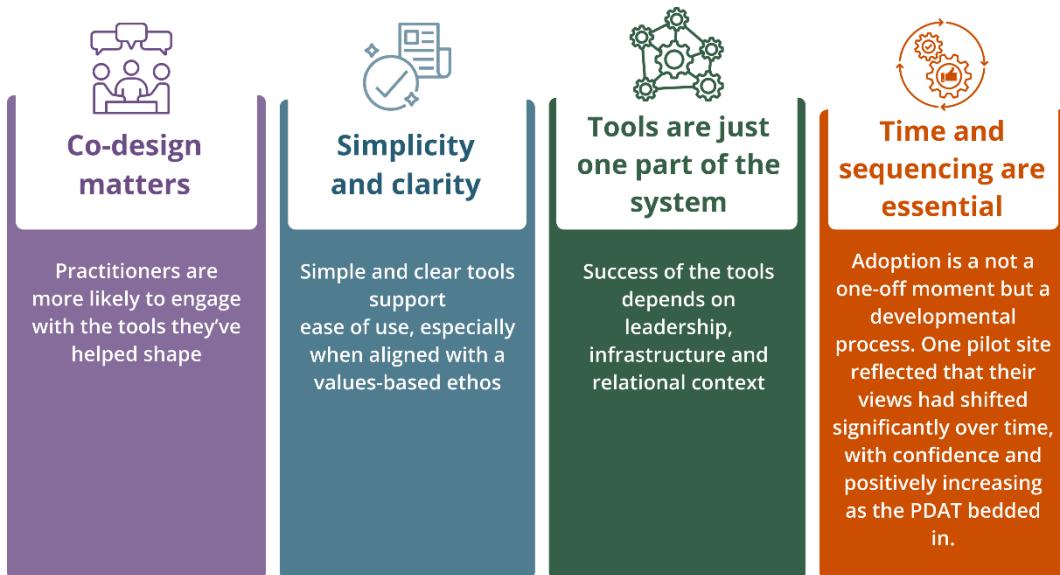
The move to a standardised tool, a change encountered by every YJS in England and Wales within a similar timeframe, is a shift which would likely benefit from shared learning across different YJSs. However, based on consultation, there was only limited evidence that cross-sectoral learning has happened.

That said, there was appetite for connection, particularly where teams felt isolated or unsure about aspects of the PDAT. The roll-out of a national tool like the PDAT offers a valuable opportunity to strengthen peer learning across the sector.

3.5.5 What this means for future tool development

The PDAT roll-out has surfaced clear lessons for future tool development and implementation. These are summarised in Figure 14.

Figure 14: Key lessons from the PDAT



Taken together, these lessons underscore that assessment tools alone cannot transform practice, but, when grounded in shared values, designed with children in mind and implemented within a supportive system, they can play a powerful role in embedding the principles of the Child First framework across the youth justice landscape.

3.5.6 Learning and recommendations

The recommendations in Figure 15 draw directly from the learning set out in this report. Together, they aim to build on the PDAT's strengths, address the barriers identified and ensure the principles of the Child First framework are applied consistently across the youth justice system.

Figure 15: Recommendations based on learning

Recommendations for YJB	Build on PDAT learning to inform future tools: retain strengths-based framing grounded in the Child First framework in future assessment frameworks.
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	<p>Continue to provide opportunities for follow-up learning and ensure communication and targeting reaches both managers and practitioners so sessions are accessible and relevant.</p> <p>Facilitate peer learning opportunities across YJSs to share adaptations and improve practice nationally.</p>
Recommendations for YJS leaders 	<p>Use PDAT language and structure to promote strengths-based, relational practice beyond diversion cases.</p> <p>Encourage reflective, team-based learning and adaptation of the PDAT where needed and connect staff to peer networks across YJSs where possible, ensuring that local adaptations and challenges feed into wider sector learning.</p>
Recommendations for YJS practitioners 	<p>Apply PDAT learning across your work: use co-creation techniques and child-friendly language in all assessment contexts.</p> <p>Engage actively in any follow-up opportunities provided and share learning with peers.</p>

3.6 Conclusion

The roll-out of the PDAT has been shaped by piloting, national training and detailed guidance, all of which helped build confidence and ownership among many practitioners. Children's voices also highlighted the value of more relational, child-friendly assessments. At the same time, progress has been uneven, with system-level barriers and local capacity shaping how far the tool has been embedded in practice. The lessons from this experience show that future tools will need not only strong design but also the leadership, resources and partnerships required to embed the principles of the Child First framework consistently across the youth justice system.

Annex 1: Methodology

This annex summarises the methodology used in this evaluation. The evaluation focused on two overarching questions: (1) to what extent is the PDAT achieving its intended changes to practice and improving the experience of staff and children, and (2) what can be learned to improve the tool and guidance for the future? These questions shaped our sampling, data collection and analysis. The methods were qualitative and exploratory, designed to generate rich, triangulated insights rather than statistical generalisations.

What we set out to learn

- Is the PDAT being used?
- What are children's experiences?
- How did people find the training?
- What can be improved or adapted?

Document review



Light-touch review of the PDAT, guidance and training materials to contextualise findings

Case studies in five YJSs



- Deep dives in five YJSs including England and Wales in urban and rural locations serving a mix of children
- Focus on consultation with:
 - Children, n=10
 - Practitioners, n=39
 - Managers, n=13

Consultation with YJB partners



One-off group consultation with partners involved in developing the PDAT and delivering training to contextualise findings

Thematic analysis and triangulation



Coding across all data, triangulating across the five YJSs and respondent types

Ethics and confidentiality

Conducted in line with GSR Ethics Checklist. Informed consent obtained and pseudonyms used throughout.

Recruitment of children

Children were recruited through strategic and convenient sampling, in close collaboration with Youth Justice Services (YJSs). Each YJS was asked to identify up to five children who had recently been assessed using the PDAT and who were likely to feel comfortable taking part in a short discussion about their experience. Recruitment aimed to ensure diversity across background, experience and level of need, while remaining sensitive to local capacity and safeguarding considerations.

We recognise that involving YJS staff in recruitment could introduce bias towards children who were more confident, engaged or whose relationships with practitioners were positive. To mitigate this, YJSs were provided with clear guidance encouraging the inclusion of a range of children, for example, those with differing levels of engagement, backgrounds and assessment experiences. The evaluation team also discussed each proposed participant with their case manager to ensure that participation would not be distressing and that the sample aimed to represent a balance of views within the service.

Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from both the child and their parent/carer prior to interview. Consent forms were specific to this evaluation and clearly set out the purpose of the research, how data would be used, and participants' right to withdraw at any time.

Interviews were one-to-one and child-led, lasting up to around 30 minutes. Where possible, these took place in person at a Youth Justice Service office or another safe community setting; however, virtual participation was also offered where this better met a child's access needs or preferences. A parent, carer or case manager was present during the discussion if the child preferred this, to help ensure they felt comfortable and supported. Each child received a £20 high street voucher as a thank you for their time.

Before each interview, the evaluation team spoke with the relevant case manager to confirm suitability and avoid sensitive topics.

As children would likely not have had direct experience of earlier assessment tools, the interviews focused on their perceptions of how the PDAT process felt, such as whether they felt listened to, understood and involved in shaping their plans, rather than on comparisons with previous frameworks. This provided insight into how PDAT-supported practice was being experienced by children in real time.

Recruitment of YJS staff

YJS staff were recruited through purposive sampling, in collaboration with local service managers, to ensure that a range of roles and perspectives were represented. Each of the five participating YJSs was invited to nominate staff members who were directly involved in implementing or quality assuring the PDAT. This included frontline practitioners, team leaders and strategic managers, enabling the evaluation to capture both operational and leadership viewpoints.

We recognise that inviting managers to nominate participants may introduce bias, for example towards staff who were more engaged or confident in using the PDAT. To mitigate this, services were encouraged to include staff with a mix of experience levels and views, including those who were less confident or more critical of the tool. The evaluation team emphasised that participation was confidential and voluntary, and that insights - whether positive or negative - were valuable for learning.

In total, 39 practitioners and 13 managers took part across the five Youth Justice Services, alongside two representatives from the Youth Justice Board. Fieldwork with staff took the form of individual interviews and focus groups, held either in person or via Microsoft Teams or telephone to accommodate participants' availability and preferences.

Staff discussions explored experiences of PDAT implementation, training and guidance, as well as perceived impacts on assessment practice. Participants gave informed consent before taking part.

Annex 2: Description of PDAT development

Between 2021 and 2024, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) worked closely with the sector to design and refine the Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool (PDAT). The process drew on extensive consultation and evidence gathering, including the collection and review of more than 40 existing assessment tools. These were compared against practice in Youth Justice Services (YJSs) rated *outstanding* by HM Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) for their out-of-court work. Feedback from practitioners, Turnaround leads and HMIP inspectors was used throughout to shape and test the emerging tool.

Key steps in development:

- A call for evidence invited YJSs to share their existing assessment tools, generating over 40 submissions.
- A series of national workshops was held.
- Tools were cross-checked against HMIP inspection findings to identify features of high-quality assessment.
- Draft versions of the PDAT were circulated across the sector for review and comment.
- The YJB liaised with key partners, including Partners in Practice sites, HMIP, Turnaround, YANO the Department for Education and Contextual Safeguarding teams.
- Three pilot sites were selected to reflect a mix of contexts (urban, semi-rural and Welsh).
- Feedback from these pilot sites and other early adopters was gathered through structured feedback forms, an issues log and monthly review meetings.

Interest in the PDAT extended beyond the pilot sites. Additional services were invited to become early adopters and provide feedback on implementation. The three legacy Partners in Practice sites also contributed to early consultation and ongoing refinement.

Annex 3: Table of recommendations

Report section	YJB	YJS leaders	YJS practitioners	CMS providers
2.1	<p>Balance national consistency with local flexibility by identifying which PDAT fields must be standardised for data purposes, while allowing local services to adapt non-core elements (e.g. Plan presentation) to fit children's needs.</p> <p>Build in structured co-production with YJS practitioners and managers as a standard part of tool design.</p>	<p>Reinforce the PDAT's role as a practice tool in training and supervision, highlighting how it should support rather than replace professional judgement and relational approaches.</p> <p>Support staff in recognising the practical benefits of adopting a shared national tool (e.g. comparability, data for inspections, improved consistency).</p>	<p>Approach the PDAT as a framework to guide proportionate, relational conversations with children, while applying professional judgement to tailor the depth of assessment to the child's context.</p> <p>Contribute actively to feedback loops with leaders and the YJB to ensure practice insights continue to shape refinement of national tools.</p>	
2.2	<p>Ensure future training blends theory and practice, with reflective learning and walkthroughs tailored to experience levels, and guidance on distinguishing description from analysis to cut duplication.</p> <p>Differentiate training sessions where possible so that managers, experienced staff</p>	<p>Lead by example: engage with the PDAT and guidance directly and support reflective use in supervision and team meetings.</p> <p>Support internal roll-out by offering in-house training or walkthroughs of completed PDATs, and make active use of both the full guidance and</p>	<p>Use the guidance actively in supervision and peer learning, making particular use of prompts that help to analyse children's experiences and structure conversations in a child-centred way.</p> <p>Contribute feedback on training and guidance to support ongoing refinement of the tool.</p>	<p>Address usability problems highlighted by practitioners, including slow saving and overly complex drop-down menus.</p> <p>Resolve incidents of typos and the PDAT misaligning with the original Word document format.</p>

	<p>and newer practitioners each get what they need.</p> <p>Continue to promote the guidance and embed key prompts into the PDAT which help practitioners differentiate between where description vs analysis are needed.</p> <p>Communicate more clearly how the QA document can be used as a shorter, practitioner-friendly guide alongside the full guidance.</p>	<p>the shorter QA document to support staff confidence.</p>		<p>Provide consistent support to YJSs during migration processes.</p> <p>Respond promptly to issues escalated by YJSs and provide clear routes for feedback.</p>
2.3	<p>Continue to emphasise proportionality in how the PDAT is used, making clear that depth of assessment should be tailored to the child's needs and circumstances.</p> <p>Co-design new tools and related resources with neurodivergent practitioners to improve accessibility and workflow.</p> <p>Continue to work with YJSs to address areas of perceived repetition within the PDAT, either by ensuring the intended</p>	<p>Lead consistent QA processes to reduce uncertainty about assessment detail.</p> <p>Provide sit-down support sessions for staff to share PDAT experiences and reflect on practice challenges.</p> <p>Escalate persistent CMS or system usability issues directly to CMS providers.</p>	<p>Use interactive formats (e.g. child-friendly plans or visuals) to make planning meaningful and accessible.</p> <p>Choose how to share the PDAT (in full, adapted or verbally) based on what works best for the child and family.</p>	

	<p>differences between sections/questions are clear, or by removing areas of repetition.</p>			
2.5	<p>Build on PDAT learning to inform future tools: retain strengths-based framing grounded in the Child First framework in future assessment frameworks.</p> <p>Continue to provide opportunities for follow-up learning and ensure communication and targeting reaches both managers and practitioners so sessions are accessible and relevant.</p> <p>Facilitate peer learning opportunities across YJSs to share adaptations and improve practice nationally.</p>	<p>Use PDAT language and structure to promote strengths-based, relational practice beyond diversion cases.</p> <p>Encourage reflective, team-based learning and adaptation of the PDAT where needed and connect staff to peer networks across YJSs where possible, ensuring that local adaptations and challenges feed into wider sector learning.</p>	<p>Apply PDAT learning across your work: use co-creation techniques and child-friendly language in all assessment contexts.</p> <p>Engage actively in any follow-up opportunities provided and share learning with peers.</p>	



CordisBright Limited

23/24 Smithfield Street, London EC1A 9LF

Telephone 020 7330 9170
Email info@cordisbright.co.uk
Internet www.cordisbright.co.uk