

# Learning from the 2024 disturbances

Insights from youth justice services

November 2025



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# Glossary

<b>Term / Acronym</b>	<b>Definition</b>
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services – NHS services supporting children with mental health needs.
Child First	A strategic and evidence-based framework that prioritises seeing children as children, promoting positive outcomes, and avoiding criminalisation.
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service – responsible for prosecuting criminal cases investigated by the police.
Custody Navigator	A role supporting children in custody and helping plan for reintegration.
DTO	Detention and Training Order – a custodial sentence for children.
Early Help	Local authority services aimed at supporting children and families before issues escalate.
FTE	First-Time Entrant – a child who enters the youth justice system for the first time.
OOCR	Out-of-Court Resolution (previously known as Disposal) – a resolution to divert children from prosecution and prevent further offending.
PSR	Pre-Sentence Report – a report prepared for the court to inform sentencing decisions.
Resource Hub	An online platform managed by the YJB to share guidance, tools, and examples of good practice.
YJB	Youth Justice Board – oversees the youth justice system in England and Wales.
YJS	Youth justice services – local multi-agency teams working with children in the youth justice system.

# Summary

In July–August 2024, the UK experienced its most widespread public disorder since the 2011 riots, following the killing of three little girls in Southport, and the rapid spread of misinformation online about the attacker. All those who make up the YJB and those working as part of it offer their heartfelt condolences to the families of the three little girls and the others that were harmed and impacted by the events on 29 July 2024. These violent disturbances were marked by anti-immigration sentiment and resulted in over 900 court hearings, including 106 children by December 2024. Whilst disturbances occurred across England, the majority of incidents involving children were concentrated in the North of England.

This report, prepared by the Youth Justice Board (YJB), draws on 35 survey responses from 28 youth justice services (YJSs) and interviews with 10 Heads of Service. It explores how YJSs operated under pressure, supported children involved, and applied the evidence base of the Child First framework. The timing of the research—one year after the events—allowed services to reflect on outcomes and practice.

Key findings include:

- **Impact:** Services experienced increased workloads, reduced time for assessments, and heightened community tensions.
- **Operational resilience and preparedness:** Most YJSs responded as they normally would, demonstrating adaptability and confidence in supporting children. However, the extraordinary circumstances, media scrutiny, and rapid judicial processes added complexity.
- **Partnership working:** Effective collaboration with police, education, and community safety teams was critical. These relationships enabled diversionary outcomes where appropriate and helped mitigate over-criminalisation.
- **Challenges:** YJSs faced difficulties in identifying children likely to become involved in the disturbances and navigating punitive media narratives. Whilst YJSs applied the Child First framework, they were operating in a challenging environment which resulted in opportunities for diversion being missed and outcome decisions potentially being made outside of existing frameworks (e.g., Child Gravity Matrix). Some YJSs did not have suitable tailored interventions and as a result needed to create new ones.
- **Staff confidence and well-being:** Managers arranged staff support, recognising the emotional toll of the disturbances. Informal and formal support systems were implemented.
- **YJB Support:** Oversight Managers and local partnerships were valued. However, services called for clearer guidance, stronger advocacy, and support with media engagement.

The report identifies opportunities for the YJB to strengthen strategic partnerships, support media engagement, and promote consistent practice. It also highlights the need for contingency planning and sharing effective interventions to prepare for future incidents.

# Context

The violent disturbances of July-August 2024 began in Southport in the wake of the murders of Elsie Dot Stancombe, Alice de Silva Aguiar and Bebe King following the rapid circulation of misinformation about the attacker spread online. According to the police and independent reports, these incidents represented the most widespread public disorder in the UK<sup>1</sup> since the 2011 riots<sup>2</sup> and were marked by a strong anti-immigration sentiment. Although there were notable violent disturbances in the South of England and other parts of the UK, most disturbances involving children were concentrated in the North of England.

The violent disturbances (referred to from here onwards as “disturbances”) were characterised by rapid charging and early sentencing. By 16 August 2024, 460 people had already appeared in court and at least 99 were sentenced<sup>3</sup> - although this data release did not include age breakdowns. By December 2024, 916 people had had a first hearing, of which 106 were children<sup>4</sup>. The CPS prioritised swift prosecutions, and convictions of violent disorder and rioting were publicly shared to deter further disturbances<sup>5</sup>.

Since then, research has sought to understand and assess the police response<sup>6 7 8</sup> and children’s involvement<sup>9</sup>, as well as learnings from local services and voluntary organisations<sup>10</sup>. These reports stated the role that children played in the disturbances with approximately 147 children being arrested by September 2024, the youngest of which was 11 years old<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, arrests were made using CCTV and other identification methods during the weeks and months after the disturbances, with some YJSs still receiving children a year after the disturbances took place.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that while disturbances occurred across the UK, the YJB has statutory oversight of the youth justice system in England and Wales.

<sup>2</sup> The YJB produced at a time a report on the views and experiences of children and YJS staff about their role in the disturbances, titled [Young People and the August 2011 disturbances](#).

<sup>3</sup> HMCTS (16 August 2024). Statistical dataset: Management information on magistrates’ court activity - 15 August 2024. Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/management-information-on-magistrates-court-activity-16-august-2024>

<sup>4</sup> HMCTS (2 December 2024), [Ad hoc management information release 2 December 2024](#). Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/management-information-on-magistrates-court-activity-2-december-2024>

<sup>5</sup> See for example: [Updated with sentence: Man admits violent disorder after Southport police van attack | The Crown Prosecution Service](#)

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Committee Report (April 2025). Police Response to the 2024 summer disorder. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmhaff/381/report.html>

<sup>7</sup> HMICFRS (December 2024) An inspection of police response to the public disorder in July and August 2024: Tranche 1. Available here: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/police-response-to-public-disorder-in-july-and-august-2024-tranche-1/>

<sup>8</sup> HMICFRS (May 2025) An inspection of police response to the public disorder in July and August 2024: Tranche 2. Available here: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/police-response-to-public-disorder-in-july-and-august-2024-tranche-2/>

<sup>9</sup> Children’s Commissioner (January 2025). Children’s involvement in the 2024 riots. Available here: <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2025/01/Childrens-involvement-in-the-2024-Riots-Report.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> See for example report produced by 10GM, [The Impact on Communities: August 2024’s Racist Riots](#). (December 2024).

This was the complex backdrop in which YJSs, particularly in the North of England, operated and provided children involved with the support they needed, whilst managing existing caseloads. This report aims to capture YJSs views and experiences to identify lessons learned and actionable recommendations for the YJB and the sector.

### **Clarification on terminology**

This report uses disturbances or violent disturbances in reference to the events that occurred between July-August 2024 for consistency, but other terms may have been used by participants (e.g., riots, disturbances, disorder, etc.). This report does not aim to advocate for one word over the other, and participants were encouraged to use their own wording.

# Methodology

The disturbances in the UK in July-August 2024 raised critical questions about the preparedness, responsiveness and flexibility of YJSs, as well as the leadership and oversight of the YJB in times of pressure for YJSs. This study aimed to:

- Explore how services operated under scrutiny and pressure during the disturbances of summer 2024.
- Describe staff experiences during this period, after a year had passed to allow for reflection, and to capture lessons learned.
- Identify what worked well and what could be improved regarding the YJB's support to this type of national incident.
- Identify preventative support or mechanisms that could be useful to similar events in the future.

A mixed methods approach was followed, and a year has provided enough time for many children to go through the system and complete their orders, offering a further opportunity to reflect on the disturbances and the impact it had on YJSs. This included an online survey aimed at YJS practitioners and semi-structured interviews with YJS leads. YJSs who have seen a minimum of one child involved in the disturbances, even if the child travelled elsewhere, were invited to participate. This resulted in 28 YJSs in England invited to participate. No children in Wales have been arrested or referred to a YJS due to participation in the disturbances, therefore all services invited to participate were from England. The study used a snowballing sampling method in which the Heads of Service of the identified 28 services were invited to cascade the survey link to their teams, including seconded members of staff. The survey was open from 9 June until 31 July 2025 and obtained 35 responses:

- 25 responses were from the North of England (94%) and 3 from the South of England (6%).
- Most of the survey respondents were youth justice practitioners (51%, 18 out of 35), 43% (14 out of 35) were strategic or operational managers, and only 6% (2 out of 35) were seconded statutory partners. One person preferred not to say their role.

In addition to the survey, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted between July-August 2025 with Heads of Service of YJSs across the North of England as this was the area where the majority of incidents involving children occurred. This report aims to gather the evidence and describe the emerging themes from these sources.

## Scope and limitations

This research did not include interviews with partner agencies; therefore, the findings presented in this report reflect only the views and experiences of the participating YJSs. This study did not aim to provide an inquiry or formal assessment of the youth justice system response to the 2024 disturbances but rather aimed to capture the insights of YJS practitioners to inform understanding of their experiences during this period.

# Findings

The findings presented in this section reflect the experiences of YJSs in England that supported children involved in the 2024 disturbances. Drawing on survey responses and interviews with Heads of Service, the report highlights the operational impact of the events, the responses from YJSs, and the challenges faced in applying the Child First evidence-base under pressure. These insights offer a basis for understanding what worked well and how future support and preparedness can be strengthened.

## Impact

- The 2024 disturbances had a **significant impact on YJSs**, with 65% of survey respondents indicating a significant impact or major disruption. However, some respondents indicated that the service operated as business as usual.
- The disturbances posed an **increased operational strain** on YJSs by increasing workloads, missed opportunities for diversion, working extended hours, reduced timelines for delivery of key reports (e.g., pre-sentencing reports to courts) and elevated levels of stress.
- Interviewees emphasised the impact the aftermath of the disturbances also had on children involved and their families. Many of the children involved were identified on social media and were often approached by local media outlets. Interviewees said that this impacted children's mental health, by increasing stigma, and made it difficult to access support networks.

*People found out who (the children) were, and they said that the media were knocking on doors and turning up, and people were talking about them from the communities and stuff. It was the pressure on the children that was quite horrendous. This was one of the reasons one kid spiralled and ended up in care. It's a good outcome in the end, because we were able to work with him and resettle him, but he struggled a lot. **Head of Service, interview 2***

## YJS responses

### YJS leadership

- **Quick response and proactive YJS leadership.** All participating YJSs reported adaptability and commitment to supporting children despite pressures. They shared how they were involved in conversations with the police at an early stage to ensure the adequate response for children was applied. This engagement led to varied levels of success; many shared how existing positive relationships were a key element to ensure children involved in the disturbances received appropriate outcomes, such as reducing rioting charges to violent disorder, or greater use of

community referral orders and out-of-court resolutions<sup>11</sup>. This was perceived as a key element to prevent unnecessary criminalisation of children.

*My expectation was that there would be a significant volume of children who had been into custody for rioting, which is obviously a high gravity offence. I was worried that all those kids would be in custody, and we wouldn't have the staff to provide appropriate support. (...). Luckily, this wasn't the case and those concerns were alleviated. **Head of Service, interview 8***

- **Partnership working as a key element.** A close working relationship with external stakeholders like the police, education and court teams were reported as essential in ensuring positive outcomes for children. For example, some police forces shared intelligence with YJSs, so they were able to identify children at risk of becoming involved in the disturbances and prevent them from doing so. Partnership working within councils was also highlighted as important. On this occasion, many YJSs highlighted their partnership with community safety teams in particular. In the aftermath of the disturbances, these partnerships were also stated as important to ensure children's support needs were met and pro-social behaviours and attitudes could flourish.

*So we got schools together before children went back to school in September because there was lots of anxiety around kids going back to school who had been involved in the riot. Everybody knew which children were involved, because they were all over social media. And we didn't want schools doubling down on children. (...) So we let them know about the work that we were doing with them and provided a contact if there were any issues. (...). We really worked together to prevent any of these kids miss school. **Head of Service, interview 4***

- **Additional training for staff.** Some services provided specific training to staff to better support children going through court, for example, by increasing the number of staff able to conduct assessments or write Pre-Sentencing Reports (PSR). This was required as the reduced numbers of children entering the youth justice system over time has meant that cohorts have increasingly included cases for prevention and diversion and many YJSs have less need to produce PSRs for court consideration; an area where the role of the Probation Officer in the YJS is key. Additionally, one YJS mentioned the importance of **compassionate leadership** and that type of training would be beneficial in the future, not only should similar incident occur again, but for their everyday role.

*Most of our caseload is diversionary so we have very few staff trained in conducting PSR, so we provided training to staff on this in case we received a high number of children who needed it. **Head of Service, interview 7***

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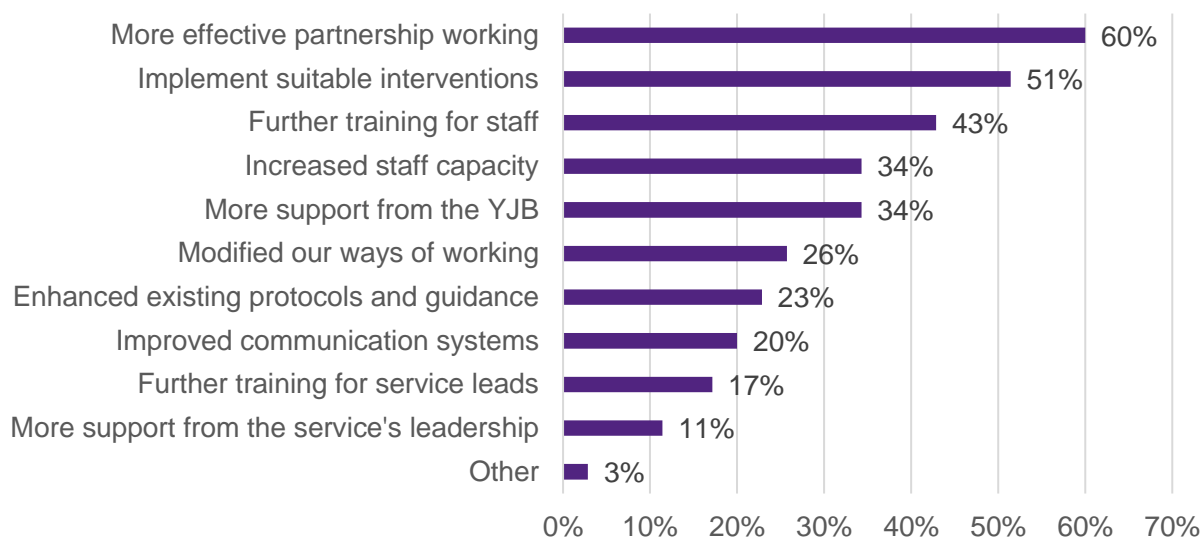
<sup>11</sup> Out-of-court resolutions were previously referred as out-of-court disposals.

## Preparedness

- **Business as usual for many YJSs.** Some Heads of Service emphasised that they regularly see and support children with complex histories of exploitation and complex needs, and without minimising the offences children were charged with, services felt they were adequately prepared to support the children who were involved in the disturbances. However, the context in which they needed to respond added complexity. There were instances where services shared that they had to adapt to office closures and limited travel for staff to reduce risks to them.

*There were no changes to service provision. Supporting children, parents/ carers as business as usual. YJS practitioner, survey respondent*

- Despite the challenging circumstances that services were operating in, the sector showed their resilience by increasing conversations with partners (74%) and implementing specific interventions (46%). It is interesting to note that only 6% halted businesses as usual. This was reiterated by interviewees and survey responses that recognised that staff increased their workloads. Staff working extended hours suggested that rather than diverting attention from business as usual, additional work was undertaken to accommodate the increased demand.
- Participants noted that there was a high level of tension within communities and shared that a lot of time was spent managing this to preserve good working relationships with community teams, victim support, and others. This was important to ensure that the needs of children were met and to prevent further escalation and keep communities safe.
- Survey respondents also shared that they felt **confident in supporting children** whether during the 2024 disturbances or potential future disturbances. However, they felt **unsure about identifying children** who may be at risk of becoming involved in those circumstances. This was confirmed by interviewees who highlighted the challenge of identifying children when an unforeseen event occurs.
- The survey also asked about **next steps** to be taken to better prepare for potential future disturbances. More effective partnership working (60%) and implement suitable interventions (51%) were identified as the measures most required.



**Figure 1. Measures identified by respondents to better prepare youth justice services for future disturbances (n=35).**

## Interventions

- **Interventions varied across regions.** Many YJSs used restorative approaches – one YJS outlined their engagement with local police officers who were policing the disturbances. They created dialogue between the children and the police which was unprecedented for that area. Bespoke interventions on digital safety and misinformation online, as well as violent disorder and victim awareness were also designed. YJSs recognised through the assessment process conducted that most children were not politically motivated but rather were participating in the violent disturbances based on impulsive decision-making and influenced by the adults around them<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, whilst some services incorporated an element of anti-racism or extremism in their interventions, this was not the focus.
- Upon assessment, many of the **children were found to have additional needs** and many of the interventions, particularly for those with community referral orders, were centred in providing support to meet those needs (e.g., speech and language support, referrals to CAMHS, working with families, etc.).

*All the children have engaged well. And there were so many contributing factors (into them getting involved in the disturbances), such as lack of access to education, association with negative peer groups, lack of constructive activities, etc. So a lot of the intervention was based around that.* **Head of Service, interview 1**

- **Specialised roles were a great support.** It was shared how certain skills and specialised roles within YJSs were of great support when navigating the complex environment and a sudden influx of children. Speech and language workers, custody navigators, youth justice operational court teams are a few examples.

<sup>12</sup> Refer to [the Children's Commissioner report](#) for further details on the characteristics and children's experiences of the disturbances

*Funds were made available to put in post a prevention worker to work directly with those on bail for the offences, for some young people who were bailed they had the opportunity to engage with support instead of waiting for the police investigation/getting to court, this has resulted in lesser outcomes being received at court as recognition for this has been granted as part of sentencing. **YJS practitioner, survey respondent***

*We've got a great speech and language worker in our service, and she's been very helpful to quickly understand how best to work with those children who have additional needs and make the work most impactful (...). To be honest, if I were to put a statutory partnership together, I would have a speech and language in it. **Head of Service, interview 8***

- Similarly, participants mentioned “feeling lucky” a few times when referring to having access to additional specialised staff (e.g., custody navigators or court teams), or they had positive working relationships with partners (e.g., police, education). However, effective partnership working is the result of the **hard work and effort from all parties** prior and during the disturbances, which should be recognised.

*The police share anything that's going on in the community that could impact young people, so we have that as a direct link. I think we're quite lucky really because we have a really good partnership working with the police. **Head of Service 1***

- **Developing cultural competence training or similar.** In the aftermath of the disturbances, a few services invested in cultural competence training for their staff to be able to support their communities better and strengthen those relationships. Despite assessments identifying that the majority of children were not motivated to attend the disturbances due to their beliefs, some services carried out interventions around preventing racist or extremist thoughts for the children in their service. For example, a YJS sponsored a school to co-design a workshop on islamophobia which was later delivered within the school and in conjunction with some of the children involved in the disturbances. This aimed to educate and increase empathy of the children who “*hadn't even contemplated how their actions impacted on other children in the community*” (Head of Service 2). Another YJS employed the tools by [Red Card](#), a voluntary organisation that aims to end racism through education.

*So there was no previous involvement with (child) prior to that point, the kind of the general consensus when assessments were completed and pre-sentence reports for court was that they were all just kind of going along with the crowd. **Head of Service, interview 4***

## Challenges

Youth justice services encountered several operational challenges during the 2024 disturbances. These included difficulties in responding to ongoing media scrutiny, identifying vulnerable children to prevent involvement, and adapting interventions to meet emerging needs. Services also reported inconsistencies in diversion opportunities and sentencing decisions applied, both across different YJSs and within the same areas as time passed. This was seen as a barrier in applying the Child First framework and best supporting prevention of future offending behaviours.

- **Media narrative and interest was a challenge** as many services received press enquiries, and the messaging was focused on punishment and prosecution. This was difficult for YJSs to navigate as it created a narrative that did not consider seeing children as children and created a barrier when working in communities and advocating for the evidence base to be applied.

*The media saying, you know, we're still coming for you and we're going to continue to pursue anyone involved in the riots... We were worried about the police response because we could have seen a lot of those children immediately taken to court and given custodial sentences, which is not the response that we would hope for our children.*

**Head of Service, interview 8**

*You've got my staff trying to navigate the relationships, trying to keep people on board, while being followed by press into coffee shops.* **Head of Service, interview 2**

- **Identifying children to prevent them getting involved was difficult.** Most survey respondents indicated that there were no missed opportunities within YJSs to prevent children from becoming involved in the disturbances (71%). Interviewees identified that the unforeseen nature of events was the main reason for this; however, once the disturbances started, there was the need for YJSs to prepare a response to prevent further children getting involved.

*The riots spread very quickly across areas. This is not something this area has experienced so we were unprepared.* **YJS practitioner, survey respondent**

*I feel given the timing it was hard to get messages to young people, and it was hard to know in advance if there would be disturbances in (our area).* **YJS practitioner, survey respondent**

- **Children were generally not known to YJSs.** Interviewees shared that they did not expect the disturbances to occur so there was little else they could have done to further prevent children from getting involved. Some participants mentioned learnings from other incidents to prevent children getting involved, such as physically going into city centres, or inviting children more likely to become involved to do an activity at the same time. However, they emphasised that these initiatives would have not worked as very few children involved were known to YJSs. This highlights the importance of effective communication and partnership working, as

YJS are part of the wider partnership where other services may have held other information to support identification.

*We really hope that this year, our first time entrants' plummets because what we're hoping is the majority of children that got brought into this will never reoffend.* **Head of Service, interview 5**

- Interviewees shared how many **children were known to other services** such as children's services or CAMHS, as many had additional educational needs and/or were looked-after. Most of the survey respondents stated there were no missed opportunities, and a few mentioned that children were not identified due to challenges in working with education, local schools (3 out of 35, 9%), Children's Services and Early Help (3 out of 35, 9%).
- **Continuous trickling of cases as children are still being identified by the police.** This poses a challenge for YJSs as it makes it difficult to predict workload and need but also risks diminishing the impact of interventions with the children involved because of time passed since the incidents. The impact on communities and victims continues to be felt and recognised, however, as time passes, applying swift justice and meaningful interventions around restorative justice or victim work is more challenging.

*"Some of the difficulty the length of time it's taken for children to be. We've still got children coming through to us now, something that happened 12 months ago".* **Head of Service, interview 3**

- Some services had to create bespoke or new interventions to support children. Whilst many good examples have been shared, and responsiveness has emerged as a positive quality of services; a few practitioners shared in the survey that this was not necessarily the case.

*I felt that our service response was poor with little adaptation re responses or resources to the specific offences. I felt that management weren't really invested in the specific issues (politically, culturally and socially).* **YJS practitioner, survey respondent**

*There was a lot of emphasis on keeping children out of custody, but not any planning around interventions to respond specifically to the issues. I would have liked management to be more proactive.* **YJS practitioner, survey respondent**

## Applying the Child First evidence base

**Child First** is the guiding principle of the youth justice system in England and Wales. It is an approach that uses the evidence of what works to support the prevention of offending in children. In application this means seeing children as children, building pro-social identity, collaborating and diverting from stigma. Understanding how YJSs were able to apply the Child First evidence base during the disturbances is crucial to ensure children received the appropriate youth justice response to support safer communities.

- **Applying the Child First decision-making framework consistently.** YJSs were confident in applying the Child First framework, yet they shared how advocacy for the child and the need for the different agencies to assess and treat children as children was a challenge. This required YJSs to advocate for the application and consistent use of the Child First framework; this was achieved inconsistently. YJSs perceived a lack of consistency in sentencing and charges from courts, police and the CPS, which led to the over criminalisation of children or being overly punitive with little opportunity for diversion.

*The initial police response was to charge all children immediately identified and the judiciary made examples by giving DTOs. This improved as we as a service were able to challenge and remind the police of the diversionary opportunities. We had to push for children to be considered in line with their actual involvement, not the overall impact of the disorder and it was a long process, met with significant police resistance. **YJS practitioner, survey respondent***

*From the minute (the disturbances) started, we had those open conversations with the police about what we could see was going to happen, but they were having none of it. (...) Children were going to court almost immediately. It was very swift. Children were being dealt with really harshly. **Head of Service, interview 5***

- **Missed opportunities for diversion.** Many YJSs shared that the initial response from the police and the CPS was overly punitive, highly influenced by adults going through the system, which left little opportunities for diversion. It was after a lot of hard work from YJSs and their partnerships that diversionary outcomes were considered – although not in every region.

*Diversion should still have been an option but appeared to be a blanket approach of harsh punishment. **YJS practitioner, survey respondent***

*We would have been able to divert her; we would have been able to do some supportive work. She wouldn't have been taken into the system, and I think that was tough on staff knowing that. **Head of Service, interview 5***

- **Children with no prior convictions or contact with the YJS.** Many of the children involved in the disturbances were first-time entrants to the youth justice system. This presented challenges for YJSs, as both children and families were unfamiliar with youth justice processes and required additional time and support to understand assessments, court procedures, and intervention expectations. For practitioners, this meant balancing an unexpected increase in caseload with the need to spend a considerable amount of time gathering the information necessary to produce high-quality assessments and support packages, while also providing intensive guidance to children new to the system and managing strong community and media scrutiny.

*“Because (the children) got no experience of being managed by the Justice Service before. So to go from nothing to kind of, you know, 15 to 20 hours a week contact I think was quite hard for them and the families”.* **Head of Service, interview 1**

## Staff confidence and well-being

- The 2024 disturbances were a **highly emotional period**. Managers needed to take into consideration how to protect staff wellbeing where they might be personally affected by the events, and how to support staff in delivering services professionally, confidently and without unconscious bias, even where children’s motivations for attending the disturbances were not yet known or understood.

*A lot of our staff are parents, and it's not only the professional role that we do, but also that impact upon our communities and as individuals.* **Head of Service, interview 1**

- **Business as usual – YJSs felt confident in supporting children.** Overall, it was shared that YJS staff showed ability to quickly respond and despite challenges, they were motivated to work through them and support children.

*I think it was really tough for staff. What you often see is staff just absolutely make it work because we're talking about children, but at the expense of themselves.* **Head of Service, interview 5**

- **Staff well-being as key** to ensure good practice but also, to mark a YJS as a good place to work. Managers highlighted the importance of taking care of staff during that period and the variety of tools and informal and formal systems put in place to support staff. For example, a few YJSs relied on being a close-knit team, in which communication is always open and support from colleagues is readily available. Other services provided more targeted formal support, such as clinical supervision with well-being practitioners for all YJSs and workers in the council. Often, local authorities already have well-being schemes in place to support staff throughout their working lives, so YJS staff were reminded of the local support already available to them.

## Lessons learned and preparing for the future

- **Inconsistencies in reflective practice.** Some services have engaged in lessons learned sessions with relevant partners. For example, the Youth Justice Partnership in Devon and Cornwall published a lessons learned document after conducting debriefing sessions to share good practice and reflect on any learnings<sup>13</sup>. However, some YJSs shared how the interview time for this study was the first time they felt they had been able to reflect on what happened. Reflective practice is a valuable process to apply lessons learned should similar events occur in the future.
- **Partnership working emerges as key theme for success.** There were several examples shared of positive working relationships on an operational level, thus continuing this whilst strengthening strategic relationships across partners should result in better outcomes for children.
- **Recognising the value of specialised skills.** YJSs would benefit from being fully resourced, including a seconded probation worker within the team. This would enhance their capacity to produce PSRs within tight timeframes in volume, when necessary. Additionally, having contingency plans in place to support agile working would help mitigate the impact of ongoing staffing challenges within probation provision<sup>14</sup>. It may also be helpful for key partners, such as the judiciary and the police, to develop a clear understanding of the realistic timeframes required to assess the complex circumstances of children involved and to produce high-quality, meaningful reports.
- **Contingency planning.** A few services mentioned how they have modified their support packages to account for a higher volume of children in their caseload. But also, to provide them with the bespoke type of interventions that they needed – these are now on their intervention libraries and available should similar events occur again. However, some also stated the need to do further contingency planning to account for staff pressures and closer alignment to community safety teams.

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<sup>13</sup> [Criminal Justice Partnership Debrief Report to the Response to the Plymouth Disorder August 2024 – Executive Summary](#)

<sup>14</sup> [The Probation Service “has too few staff, with too little experience and training, managing too many cases” – HM Inspectorate of Probation](#)

## Support from the YJB

As part of this piece of work, we were interested in better understanding what worked well and what could be improved regarding the support provided by the YJB – whether operationally or strategically. This was mostly considered by Heads of Service or YJS Managerial staff given frontline practitioners have less direct contact with the YJB as an oversight body. These are the main points that emerged from the survey and interviews:

- The survey requested that respondents - including YJS practitioners, YJS managers and seconded staff - rate the support they received from the YJB during the disturbances from 1 (very poor) to 5 (excellent). The average (mean) rating was 3.12; mode was score 3 which obtained 22 votes. Additionally, they were also asked to indicate how helpful or unhelpful they found YJB’s Case Management Guidance during this period and the average (mean) rating was 3.14; mode was score 3 with 17 votes. The scale went from 1 (very unhelpful) to 5 (very helpful). It is noteworthy that there were no responses indicating 1 (very poor) for either question.

**Figure 2. Survey respondents rating of YJB's support during and after the disturbances. Average rating of 3.12 (n=35)**



**Figure 3. Survey respondents' rating of YJB's Case Management Guidance during the disturbances. Average rating of 3.14 (n=35)**



- Both the survey and interviews highlighted the relationship with the YJB’s Oversight Managers<sup>15</sup> and local Management Boards as positives.

<sup>15</sup> Oversight Managers act as the regional link to local YJSs. They are the professionals who ensure that YJSs deliver high-quality, effective outcomes for children in line with national standards and the Child First framework.

- There was an emphasis for YJB to improve liaising with YJSs and supporting strategic relationships with other agencies, and a greater advocacy role for the use of the evidence across partners through the Child First framework.
- Additionally, participants suggested the YJB could offer further guidance tailored to violent disorder and rioting, and support with media enquiries. Whilst local authorities' press office would be the first port of call for YJS leads to obtain guidance on how to engage with the media, a few participants highlighted that YJS staff are not media trained, and suggested benefits to the YJB support in promoting a youth justice message to counter the spread of misinformation. This could also support YJSs when talking to families and community members, as they are key partners in ensuring a holistic support package for children.

*There was a big public perception that a lot of this was youth disorder and that actually wasn't correct. So some sort of public message would be useful strategically or locally.*

**Head of Service, interview 8**

# Next steps

As part of its statutory role to oversee the youth justice system, advise Ministers, and promote good practice, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) will take forward the following actions in response to the findings of this report. These steps aim to strengthen strategic partnerships, support youth justice services (YJSs), and ensure consistent, evidence-based practice across the sector.

## 1. Champion the evidence and consistent application of the Child First framework

The Child-First framework is guided by a longstanding body of research, and the YJB will continue to advocate for its consistent application across all agencies, including judiciary, the CPS, and the police. This will not only be done through our engagement with strategic and operational stakeholders but also by continuing to promote the [Child First toolkit](#) and the growing evidence on outcomes achieved when applying the evidence based approach to practice - the Child First framework - via the Youth Justice [Resource Hub](#).

## 2. Strengthen strategic partnerships

The YJB works closely with other government departments to improve strategic partnership working, recognising its importance in delivering better outcomes for children. We are bringing together cross-government partners, including from the CPS, Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the Department for Education and the Home Office to strengthen our collective response to children's needs, ensuring that lessons learned inform future practice and improve outcomes should similar events occur in the future.

We will continue to liaise with our key strategic partners regionally via our oversight role and stakeholder engagement to facilitate effective partnership working. This may include sharing best practice on contingency planning and promote a consistent approach from all key stakeholders, such as the police, courts and the CPS.

## 3. Develop case studies on effective preventative practice and share with YJS

The YJB is in a unique position to identify and share effective practice. Whilst the [Case Management Guidance](#) does not include a specific section on disorder or rioting, it contains guidance on how to support children who have committed violent offences as well as the Serious Violence Duty in its "How to work with children" chapter. The YJB will complement the guidance by developing case studies and gathering effective practice examples on how YJSs have worked with key partners to prevent children known to them and others get involved in future disturbances. This should support the development of contingency planning carried out locally by YJSs and strengthen their preventative offer.

## 4. Review the Case Management Guidance

Whilst the Southport attack and the disturbances that followed were influenced by different factors, they both raise questions about the operational guidance that support services. The YJB has made a commitment to the Southport Inquiry to review all guidance documents, including the Case Management Guidance, to ensure it is fit for purpose and include any learnings from the Inquiry.

## 5. Support media engagement and public messaging

The YJB issued a [public statement](#) which condemned the violence and outlined the evidence base and learnings from the 2011 riots. YJB's Chair and CEO also shared their thoughts publicly in a [Guardian article](#) in which they advocated for alternative ways of holding children to account besides prosecution. While Heads of Youth Justice Service are responsible for liaising with their local communications teams, there is more that the YJB can do to support these relationships. We will engage with the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to discuss ways we can align our messaging and reflect the evidence base. This will serve to both increase preparedness should similar events occur in the future and prevent the spread of misinformation.

# Lessons for the sector

The following recommendations are intended for youth justice sector leads, including YJS managers, statutory partner leads, and strategic leaders. They are drawn from the findings of this report and intend to support local leadership in strengthening service delivery, partnership coordination, and strategic preparedness. Leaders are encouraged to reflect on these lessons as part of their ongoing improvement, planning, and cross-agency collaboration.

## 1. Embed contingency planning and prevention

YJSs, Management Boards and local partnerships should develop or revise contingency plans that account for sudden increases in caseload, particularly involving first-time entrants. These plans should include scalable intervention models, staff training (e.g., PSR writing) and mechanisms for rapid assessment and support. They should also incorporate preventative approaches, such as early identification of children who may become involved in disorder, engagement with partners (e.g., youth teams, career service, police), and targeted diversionary activities, to reduce the likelihood of children becoming involved in future potential disturbances. Contingency planning may also consider staff well-being to ensure frontline practitioners have access to the support they need to manage high-pressure situations.

## 2. Strengthen partnership working

Strong partnerships emerge as a key facilitator to better outcomes for children. This allows for effective information sharing and holistic support packages for children that consider their additional needs. YJSs and their Management Boards should consider reviewing local protocols or approaches to ensure timely identification and coordinated support for children across partnerships, particularly if they are not known to YJSs but may be known to other key partners (e.g., CAMHS, education, Early Years). YJSs and their Management Boards should also coordinate with local comms teams to ensure their youth justice expertise is included in the wider community safety messaging.

## 3. Invest in reflective practice

Debriefs and lessons learned exercises should be considered as standard practice in YJSs following major incidents. These sessions can be useful to identify gaps, share good practice and inform contingency planning. Reflective practice sessions could also be incorporated throughout the process to facilitate learning and early intervention if required.

## 4. Share learnings and good practice

Findings suggest that YJSs have developed a rich collective library of bespoke interventions and resources in response to the disturbances – such as misinformation online, restorative approaches, and cultural competence. These resources should be shared with the YJB via the Youth Justice Resource Hub to build an intervention library and shared practice with peers.

# Conclusions

The 2024 disturbances created operational challenges for youth justice services (YJSs) across England, testing their resilience, adaptability, and to apply the Child First decision-making framework under external pressure. This study aimed to explore how YJSs operated under these difficult circumstances, provide insights into their experiences, assess the Youth Justice Board's (YJB) support and identify preventative mechanisms for future incidents. These objectives have been met through a mixed-methods approach, drawing on survey responses and interviews with Heads of Service.

Despite operating under intense media scrutiny, political pressure, and heightened workloads, YJSs demonstrated adaptability and proactiveness. Existing relationships with the police, courts, and community teams played an important role in shaping outcomes. However, perceived inconsistencies in diversion, sentencing, and the application of the Child First framework were noted.

The report also identifies lessons for the sector; these include strengthening strategic partnerships and promoting consistent practice across agencies. There are also actions that the sector can take to improve preparedness for potential future incidents. These insights offer a foundation to ensure that, should similar events occur again, children receive the appropriate support, and services are equipped to respond effectively.