



Child First Justice

Building a national standard for youth justice

Key Policy Recommendations

- Develop **national standards** through which Youth Justice Teams can **consistently** apply Child First ideology to practice on a local level.
- **Target funding** to areas most in need based on these standards to **address disparity** across England and Wales.

The impact of Child First

Child First is a guiding philosophy for youth justice which **prioritises children's pro-social development** by focusing on welfare needs, desistance factors, and building positive identities.

Adopting a Child First approach enables:

- A move away from harmful 'offending' labels and risk-based frameworks and towards **collaboration and diversion** from criminal justice.
- Justice-involved children to feel **better supported and more engaged** in their desistance, potentially reducing reoffending.
- Youth justice research and the Youth Justice Board's Strategic Plans advocate for a Child First approach, but **there is not a clear structure to implement this at local levels within practice**.
- This means that teams are making decisions individually, leading to **disparities in practice across England and Wales** in if and how Child First is applied.
- This leads to a **postcode lottery for children** as to whether or not they will receive Child First youth justice.

Therefore, National Standards are needed to **ensure consistent and fair practice** for all justice-involved children.

The need for the development of National Standards

- Fractured practice and unfairness for both children and practitioners has occurred due to **ideological change** in the past **without appropriate support**.
- Decisions about change are often based on resources, meaning that change is limited to **what can be done** currently, rather than **what should be done**.
- Whilst having local flexibility is positive, **disparity in funding and levels of need** mean that some areas have been better able to implement Child First than others, mainly due to **resource levels**.

“It is clear there are systematic failings in aspects of youth custody. A national improvement plan for the whole estate is required rather than reacting to failures in individual institutions.”

(The Association of Directors of Children’s Services 2021)

- For those most at risk, Child First approaches are a **simple and effective way** to prioritise their status as children in need.
- For practitioners to effectively use a Child First approach, they need to **have appropriate resources and support to meet the needs** of the children that they work with.

Evidence base

Child First practice is already happening. **Positive activity** such as mentoring, sports programmes and music courses are all **already embedded in practice, but this is not consistent at a national level**.

This good practice needs to be **applied consistently** in all Youth Justice Teams, requiring national standards to be developed and applied. Practitioners moreover need **clear guidance and strategies** that they can easily apply in their practice

As the number of first time entrants to youth justice decreases, it is also the case that practitioners are working with those most in need, with **higher levels of complex needs and multi-agency involvement**.

90% of justice-involved children experience safety and wellbeing needs

(YJB Statistics, 2021)

Applying good practice and a fresh approach requires an **appropriate level of resourcing**.

Youth Justice Teams are already stretched following austerity. Supporting change means providing the funding to effectively implement change, starting with **targeting areas most in need** first.

Implementation

A national standard for Child First Justice could be developed through a number of key actions:

1. *Develop the Evidence Base Supporting Child First*

As Child First approaches are newer, the evidence base needs to be developed further. This requires research to be prioritised and published in order to identify effective Child First practice.

2. *Build a Minimum Standard for Child First practice*

Having a clear structure and baseline for practice nationally will allow youth justice teams to develop a sense of clarity on how to implement Child First practice.

This will still allow flexibility for new developments, but ensure a level of consistency across England and Wales.

3. *Allocate Funding based on Need*

Allocating funding based on the level of improvements required within a team to meet Child First standards will ensure that resources are available to implement Child First minimum standards, and that areas most in need are prioritised.

4. *Develop Inspection and Evaluation Standards*

This would involve ensuring other aspects of youth justice such as annual monitoring, inspections and other

accountability measures move away from risk-based frameworks (e.g. timescales).

The focus instead would be on the new national standards, ensuring that change is cultural and structural rather than superficial.

5. *Extend Child First to Other Organisations*

The multi agency approach of youth justice and links to different sectors requires a Child First approach to extend beyond criminal justice.

Child First policing, Child First education and Child First healthcare are all further steps to support a reduction in offending and reoffending by children.

Youth justice is a **public good, safeguarding both children and the public**. For this to be effective it needs to be properly funded and supported. Justice does not come cheap.

This policy briefing paper was produced by Dr Jessica Urwin, Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Leicester, with the support of the University of Leicester Institute for Policy.



Institute for Policy

References

- Association of Directors of Children's Services. "A Youth Justice System That Works for Children | Local Government Association," November 26, 2021. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/youth-justice-system-works-children>.
- Case, Stephen, and Ann Browning. "Child First Justice: The Research Evidence-Base [Full Report]." Report. Loughborough University, March 3, 2021. https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/Child_First_Justice_the_research_evidence-base_Full_report_/14152040/1.
- Case, Stephen, and Ann Browning. "The Child First Strategy Implementation Project: Realising the Guiding Principle for Youth Justice." Report. Loughborough University, October 7, 2021. https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/report/The_child_first_strategy_implementation_project_Realising_the_guiding_principle_for_youth_justice/16764124/1.
- HMIP. "An Inspection of Youth Offending Services in Birmingham," 2023. <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2023/03/Birmingham-YOS-inspection-report-v1.1.pdf>.
- Smith, Roger, and Patricia Gray. "The Changing Shape of Youth Justice: Models of Practice." *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 19, no. 5 (November 1, 2019): 554–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895818781199>.
- Urwin, Jessica. "Unbalanced Principles, Fractured Identities." In *A Return to Social Justice: Youth Justice, Ideology and Philosophy*, edited by Jessica Urwin, 115–38. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73043-1_5.
- Youth Justice Board. "Strategic Plan 2021-2024," 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/603f6d268fa8f577c44d65a8/YJB_Strategic_Plan_2021_-_2024.pdf.
- Youth Justice Board. "Youth Justice Statistics 2019-2020." London: Ministry of Justice, 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/956621/youth-justice-statistics-2019-2020.pdf.
- Youth Justice Board. "Youth Justice Statistics 2022-23," 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65b391a60c75e30012d800fa/Youth_Justice_Statistics_2022-23.pdf.



Institute for Policy

University of Leicester
University Road
Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK

e: instituteforpolicy@leicester.ac.uk

w: www.le.ac.uk/research/institutes/policy