

The effectiveness of diverting children from the criminal justice system: meeting needs, ensuring safety, and preventing reoffending

A joint inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

Launch: Friday 17 October 2025

Chief Inspectors welcome



HM Inspectorate
of Probation

HM Chief Inspector of Probation,
Martin Jones CBE



HM Inspector of Constabulary
and HM Inspector of Fire &
Rescue Services, **Michelle
Skeer OBE QPM**

Methodology and areas visited

Eight YJSs visited within six police force areas

HM Inspectorate of Probation inspected a total of 98 cases and assessed the quality of decision-making in an additional 66 cases

HMICFRS inspected the quality of disposal decisions made by police officers focussing on Outcomes 8, 20, 21 and 22

Focus groups with local partnerships and senior national leaders

User Voice conducted surveys and interviews with 50 children, and inspectors spoke with 31 parents or carers



Governance and leadership

Commitment to child-centred justice

- There was a consensus on the importance of using OoCDs to avoid the unnecessary criminalisation of children.

A fragmented approach

- The overall approach was fragmented and hindered by inadequate data and strategic direction.

A need for consistency and fairness

- Inconsistency of approaches between areas and the lack of a statutory framework for some OoCDs created a 'postcode lottery' in decision-making and raises concerns about fairness.

Governance and leadership

Data and oversight gaps

- Inadequate data and a poor understanding of OoCD effectiveness hindered the sector's understanding.

The impact of funding uncertainty

- Turnaround funding was generally used well. Short-term funding is limiting long-term planning and strategic development in youth justice.

Local leadership shows promise

- Youth justice managers showed a strong understanding of children's needs and the changing nature of the youth justice caseload.

Policing

Police-only approaches to dealing with children

- This inspection found a significant number of children, including those involved in serious offences were sometimes dealt with by police alone and without YJS involvement.

Incorrect advice concerning interventions

- Inspectors found cases where children were incorrectly told they had to complete interventions attached to community resolutions or face the risk of prosecution. This was inaccurate and potentially coercive.

Use of the gravity matrix

- Police officers did not routinely use the NPCC child gravity matrix and associated guidance, even in serious offences such as violent and sexual crimes.

Policing

Decisions and crime outcomes

- The lack of clarity about the use of Outcome 22 contributed to inconsistent approaches
- In some instances, Outcome 20 and Outcome 21 were used inappropriately for serious offences which undermined the concerning nature of the crimes and the need for appropriate responses
- The use of Outcome 20 and Outcome 21 was widespread and largely unmonitored which raised concerns about whether children and communities were kept safe.

Joint decision-making

Understanding the importance of collaboration

- The importance of strong multi-agency collaboration was widely recognised. Partnerships that worked together and communicated well made better decisions.

Inconsistencies with decision making panels

- Inconsistent panel composition, knowledge and training impacted on effectiveness

Gaps in information sharing and record keeping

- A lack of information to support decisions sometimes led to missed opportunities to achieve safety for the child and the community

Partnerships and services

Unmet support needs

- Many children lack timely access to education and emotional health support after the OoCD, increasing risks of further escalation.

The importance of victim engagement

- Support for victims needs to improve to amplify victims' voices effectively.

Inconsistent intervention delivery

- Interventions often lack joint planning, consistent delivery, and sustainability, weakening their effectiveness.

Need for coordinated partnerships

- Stronger, sustained partnership work is required to ensure timely, appropriate support that reduces the likelihood of reoffending

Partnerships and services

Effective practice makes a difference

Despite the challenges identified during fieldwork, notable practice was evident across partnership activity:

Education

Children's services

Health

Police

The quality of youth justice casework

Focus beyond the offence

- Interventions often focus only on the offence and miss underlying risks that contribute to achieving safety for the child and the community

Skilled practitioner engagement

- We found that staff generally exhibit strong engagement skills, earning trust and delivering effective support to children and families.

Valued support

- Children, parents, and carers highly value the support provided by YJS practitioners.

Need for more inclusive approaches

- The diverse needs of children sometimes go unmet; there is need for more tailored and inclusive support.

18 Recommendations

Wide-ranging; requiring action across a number of national and local organisations. Key themes include:

- Greater review of how outcomes are recorded, monitored and reviewed
- More robust evaluation of data needed to gain an understanding of the impact of different interventions and an evidence base about what works
- Ensure greater levels of consistency in decision making and delivery
- Develop more effective guidance and monitor how well organisations adhere to it
- Ensure interventions consistently meet the needs and safety concerns associated with children and that they are delivered by suitably qualified staff

ANOTHER CHANCE – Insights from children and young people with experience of Out of Court Disposals

Jenni Berlin
Alexander Beerjeraz

17th October 2025



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USER VOICE

Who we are

At User Voice, our purpose is to change minds and transform lives by bringing together people impacted by the justice system with those who deliver its services to create much needed transformative change.

We believe justice should heal as much as it punishes, creating safer communities for all.

80% of our staff have convictions, meaning we've been there – in court, in prison, or on probation – we own our own pasts, so we understand the challenges first hand and use our own lived expertise to inform everything we do.

METHODOLOGY

User Voice conducted in person, in-depth interviews with children and young people with experience of Out of Court Disposals.

50

CHILDREN AND
YOUNG PEOPLE
HAD THEIR SAY

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the consultation was to better understand children and young people's experience with Out of Court Disposals (OoCD) and whether they meet their needs. Furthermore, our objectives were:

- To understand what support children and young people, have or haven't had during their OoCD.
- To better gauge children and young people's understanding of their OoCD.
- To better understand the quality of their relationship with their Youth Justice Service (YJS) worker.
- To understand children and young people's perspectives on whether their OoCD experience would help them avoid future incidents of crime.

EARLY LIFE EXPERIENCES

- Most children and young people had faced significant adversity, including poor school attendance, exclusion, unstable home environments, mental health challenges, and experiences of abuse.
- **56%** of the young people we spoke to were neurodivergent.
- **42%** had suffered with their mental health.



"Nah, I get home schooled... I was excluded coz I never went in. ... I get some book but don't do it... I just hated to sit and just listening to all of it. It can be hard to concentrate as well."

"So much happens every day and obviously like I've already had like a court case because I went through sexual abuse as a child and things like that, so I just go through things everyday."



"[ADHD] always played a part in everything I've done in my life."

OoCD SUPPORT RECEIVED

- **94%** of the interviewed children and young people said they had received the support they needed.
- However, 'fun' activities (which helped relationship building with YSJ workers) were more common than tailored support.
- Some young people expressed they were getting support with underlying issues (mental health, substance misuse, anger management, employment).



"So, I was over a couple of days a week, okay, doing different stuff, so like going for walks, going on our bikes, and then I'd go YMCA, they'd have like, clubs on there."

"She took us for ice cream and everything. I was loving me life. She took us on drives and everything. It was actually quite fun... And I think that makes people feel more comfortable as well."



"Compass groups. So, around emotional and mental well-being and resilience. Also do boxing on Monday night. I've now got other professionals that I see regularly, twice a week. I've got a group I go to on Tuesdays. I made some friends."

RELATIONSHIP WITH YJS WORKER

- All interviewed children and young people told us they had a good relationship with their worker.
- The workers were said to be non-judgmental, caring and good listeners.
- Some young people told us that they've had to work with multiple workers, which meant repeatedly explaining their experiences and circumstances.



"Well, the youth justice team they don't judge you for stuff that you've done. They don't act like the cops as they don't judge you."

"I saw her as someone I look forward to go and see. Yeah, good relationship, honestly. She was so sound. She knows how to understand, really. She's not just some old lady. She actually understands. She knows how to joke as well. She won't just sit there and be all bland. It's not all just work. She keeps things casual."



"There's loads, like four or five people come out to see us... Yeah, it would have been better if you had the same one every time."

DESISTANCE

- **86%** of the interviewed children and young people said that receiving an OoCD will stop them from getting involved in further incidents of crime.
- Young people spoke about improvements to their mental health, education, and family life, which can all help them avoid committing further offences.
- Young people felt that they had been given a second chance by not getting a criminal record.



"I think it's definitely made me think twice about getting involved in any more crime. I don't want to go through that again."

"It's changed my perspective on a lot of things, so you realise that you do have to be careful, it's better to control what you're doing... It just kind of helped me realise the different points of perspective there is to like these situations."



"The biggest thing that helped me was probably the chance to not have a criminal record. I didn't want to mess up my future, and the support from my YOT worker helped me see things differently."

HOW WOULD CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPROVE THE OoCD PROCESS?

- **When possible, have a small team of consistent people who work with each child or young person.**
- **Make sure there are age-appropriate resources and activities available for all the age groups.**
- **Make reasonable adjustments to resources, activities and teaching methods so neurodivergent children and young people have the same opportunities to learn and communicate.**
- **Provide additional support after the OoCD finishes for those who need and/or ask for it.**

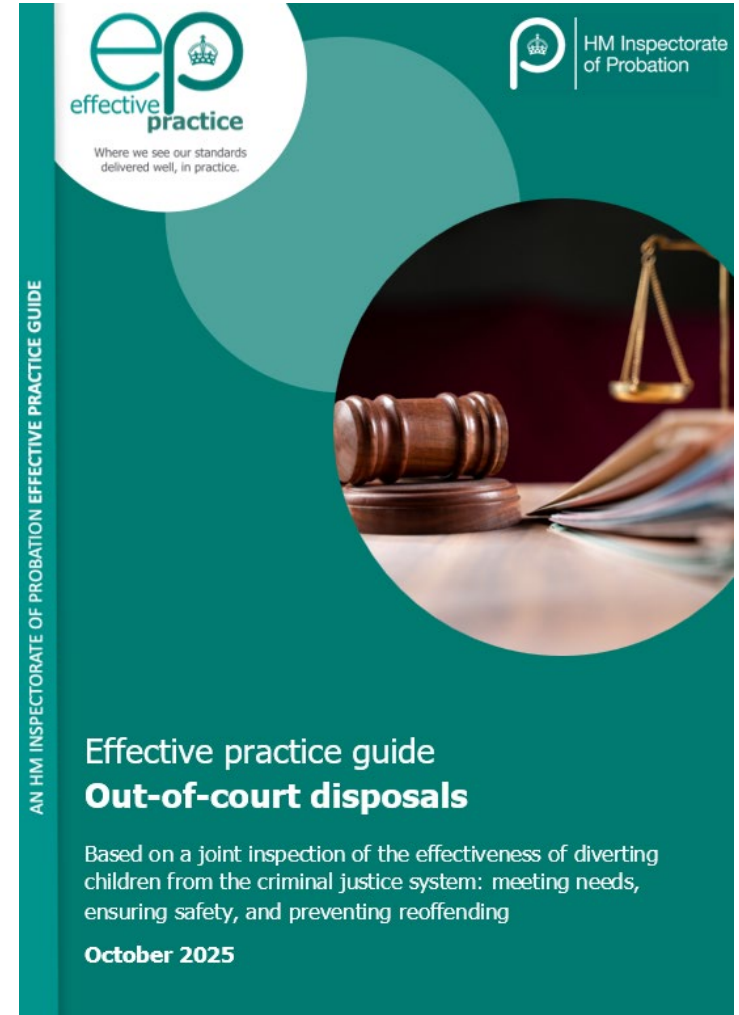


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Effective practice guide

Guide contents:

- **Introduction**
- **Background**
- **Our standards:** what we looked for and our expectations
- **Examples of effectiveness including:**
 - **Partnerships and services**
 - Police
 - Health
 - OoCD interventions activities
 - Diversity aware interventions
 - Children from low socio-economic backgrounds
 - Girls
 - Neurodiverse children
 - Working with victims
- **Delivering effective case supervision**
 - Prevention and diversion assessment tool (PDAT)
 - Partnership working
 - Exit planning





Effective practice guide

Finding your way



Useful links and tools



External video



HM Inspectorate of Probation
recorded interview

Reflection Questions

Thinking about your practice as a leader and/or case manager working with children on OoCD:

- How well do you understand the profile and needs of children on OoCD?
- What practices are effective and ineffective in your area when working with children on OoCD?
- Do training and development programmes equip staff to appropriately assess, plan and work
- with children on OoCD?
- How do you ensure that you capture the voice of children in your service delivery and interventions?





Partnerships and services

Police



Example of effectiveness: Police-led liaison with YJS for community resolutions, Dorset

- Effective practice increasingly depends on joint decision-making, safeguarding, and victim engagement in OoCDs.
- Dorset Police ensured all child CRs were reviewed by a dedicated sergeant before issue.
- Cases were assessed for offence severity, evidence, history, welfare, and personal context using the NPCC child gravity matrix before decisions were made.
- Repeat or serious offences were referred to YJS for assessment and JDMP disposal decisions.
- All decisions were logged on C413 forms, including victim impact and restorative justice details for transparency and accountability.

The model **embedded early restorative justice, capped CRs at one per child**, and **prioritised safeguarding and victim views** ensuring a child-centred and consistent approach.

Example of effectiveness: Prevention, prosecution, intervention, education, divert (PPIED) panel, Wigan

- Targeted children at risk of entering the CJS early, shifting from reactive to preventative support.
- Weekly panels brought together police, YJSs, education, health, and CAMHS to share intelligence and tailor support.
- Children accessed mentoring, mental health, education, and activities via services like Turnaround, Remedi, and STEER through voluntary, holistic support:.
- Children maintained consistent support from trusted professionals, if a child later received an OoCD.
- There was a targeted group focused on 14–17-year-olds with repeated police contact but no service involvement; bespoke offers (e.g., girls-only 12-week programme) addressed emerging needs.

Over 300 children supported to date, with improved wellbeing, reduced offending, and better education access. The model was under evaluation and considered for national rollout by the Home Office and MoJ.



Example of effectiveness: Positive health pathway service (PHPS), Wigan

- PHPS addressed unmet health needs linked to offending, strengthening exit planning and long-term outcomes.
- Offered health assessments, brief interventions, and ongoing support beyond justice timeframes.
- NHS-funded and integrated with YJSs, police panels, REACH, and children's social care across all Greater Manchester districts.
- Supported children aged 10–18 with any police contact, regardless of outcome; received 21–25 referrals monthly.
- Brokered support and improved access to services from CAMHS, SaLTs, and family-based interventions, especially effective in Wigan.

Evidence-based impact: Linked to reduced offending and improved wellbeing; under evaluation for national rollout by the Home Office and MoJ.

NHS

Example of effectiveness: Speech and language therapists (SaLTs), Dorset

- Over 80 per cent of children assessed had speech, language, and communication needs; 30 per cent had significant difficulties.
- SaLTs used tools like comic strips and easy-read materials to support understanding and engagement.
- Their strong NHS partnership enabled seamless referrals into wider health services and improved continuity of care.
- A school-based prevention approach called the 're-engage' programme-built trust and supported children in schools to prevent YJS entry.
- SaLTs trained police, probation, magistrates, and volunteers to improve communication with children.

Plans were in place to **enhance OoCD screening and expand support for children with weapon offences**, aligning with YEF guidance on education as a protective factor.



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OoCD intervention

Example of effectiveness: Lived experience mentors, Walsall

St Giles commissioned to deliver mentoring support to children at risk of offending.

Using community safety funding, the YJS commissioned a dedicated mentor to work specifically with children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

St Giles supported 13 children with a lived experience mentor to build trust and engage those who may not have responded to traditional approaches.

Ricky Otto, a mentor with lived experience of prison and a former professional footballer, worked with eight children in 2024.

His work focused on **helping Black boys explore identity, culture, masculinity, and experiences of discrimination.**



Example of effectiveness: Open Lens Media, Walsall

A development, engagement, and employability social enterprise based in the West Midlands.

Specialise in working with children, young people, and young adults between the ages of 11-35 from **disenfranchised and low socio-economic backgrounds.**

Programmes offered a package of support, including one-to-one personal development coaching, goal setting, achievement mapping, and career planning. Participants also received training in IT and digital skills, interview techniques, presentation skills, and CV writing.

Example of effectiveness: Inpower, Walsall

Based in local communities, InPower Academy used MMA to engage young people in local communities, promoting confidence, focus, stress relief, and a positive mindset.

This strengths-based, trauma-informed approach proved effective for children who struggled with traditional interventions. Weekly sessions encouraged regular physical activity, helping them build confidence, discipline, and manage behaviour.

The **programme blended physical training with structured conversations around mindset, resilience, and life choices.**



Working with victims

Example of effectiveness: The group with no name (GWiNN), Wigan

- The development of the victim support group GWiNN emerged in response to a growing number of children involved in OoCDs and who were also victims of crime.
 - Through restorative approaches and informal engagement, the group was shaped by the children themselves.
 - Provided a safe space for young people to rebuild confidence, form friendships, and re-engage with their community through regular group activities and meetings.
 - Restorative justice practitioners supported the group with practical help and relational activities, collaborating with services and offering flexible, trauma-informed support.
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- The logo for GWiNN is located in the top right corner. It features the word "GWiNN" in a stylized, bold, blue font with a yellow outline. The letters are set against a background of vibrant, colorful, radiating lines in shades of red, orange, yellow, and blue, creating a sense of energy and movement.





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