



Young Advocates for Youth Justice

**A youth-led report about keeping children
and young people out of the justice system**



Alliance
for Youth
Justice

**LEADERS
UNLOCKED**



The Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ) works to drive positive change in youth justice in England and Wales, for the benefit of children, young people, and society. The AYJ brings together over 75 diverse organisations ranging from grassroots community groups to national charities, providing a powerful and member-led voice. The AYJ aims to amplify the views of children and centre their interests, promoting widespread understanding about the underlying causes of children coming to the attention of the criminal justice system and championing approaches that enable them to reach their full potential. This involves advocating for systems, services and support that are underpinned by children's rights and social justice.

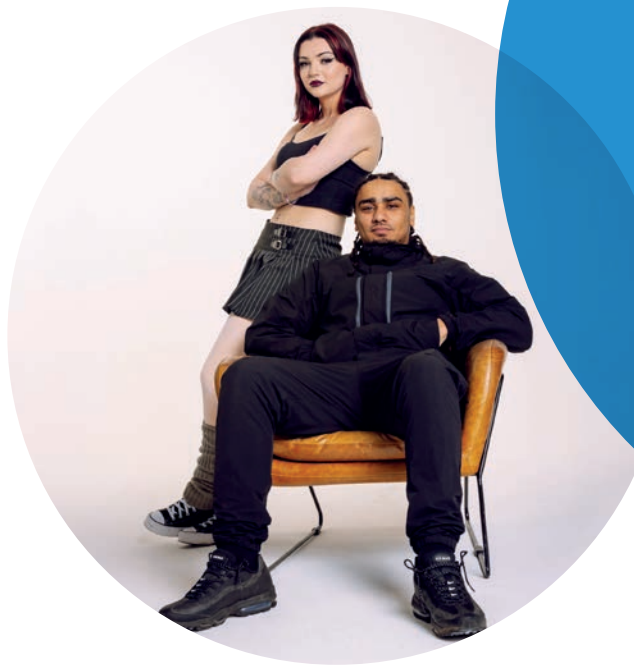
LEADERS UNLOCKED

Leaders Unlocked is a social enterprise that puts young people at the forefront of discussions and decision-making in areas and institutions they are most affected by. Leaders Unlocked takes a youth-led approach to partnership work, meaning that all work is co-produced with young people from beginning to end. In education, policing, health, justice and elsewhere, Leaders Unlocked helps organisations to meaningfully involve the people who matter and shape decision-making for the better.

A strong partnership developed from a shared ambition to amplify the voices of children and young people affected by crime and the justice system, drawing on their respective organisations' experience and expertise to support youth-led change.

Contents

About the project	4
About the Young Advocates	5
About this report	7
Acknowledgements	8
What we did	10
Choosing priorities	10
Designing peer research	10
Delivering peer research	11
Priority 1 Criminalisation	12
Key Findings	13
Recommendations	16
Priority 2 Policing	17
Key Findings	18
Recommendations	20
Advice TO young people FROM young people	21
Priority 3 Intervention and Diversion	22
Key Findings	23
Recommendations	25
Young Advocates influencing Policy and Practice ..	27
Giving evidence to the APPG on Children in Police Custody	27
Advising on National Appropriate Adult Network training	28
Youth Participation Consultancy with Youth Justice Services	29
Young Advocates developing interventions	30
Presenting the findings and recommendations	32
Takeaways from attendees	33
What's next?	34
Stay up to date	35



About the project

The Young Advocates project is a youth-led project that places the voices and experiences of children and young people affected by the justice system at the heart of decision-making. The project is delivered in partnership by the Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ) and Leaders Unlocked, with the generous support of BBC Children in Need. The project is led by children and young people who have lived experience of the youth justice system, and who want to be part of a movement to drive positive change around issues that are important to them. The project supports the Young Advocates to play a leadership role and represent children and young people across the country.

The Young Advocates project aims to:

- Enable children and young people to **use their unique expertise to inform changes** in policy, service design and practice.
- Support **personal and professional development** including leadership, facilitation, research and public speaking skills and taking part in shadowing or mentoring.
- Take a **peer-led approach** to gather and represent the views of children and young people with similar experiences.
- **Produce youth-centred reports** capturing the views of children and young people on different themes relating to youth justice.
- **Present insights and recommendations to decision-makers** and professionals working within the youth justice system.
- Act as a sounding board to **inform the work of the Alliance for Youth Justice**.

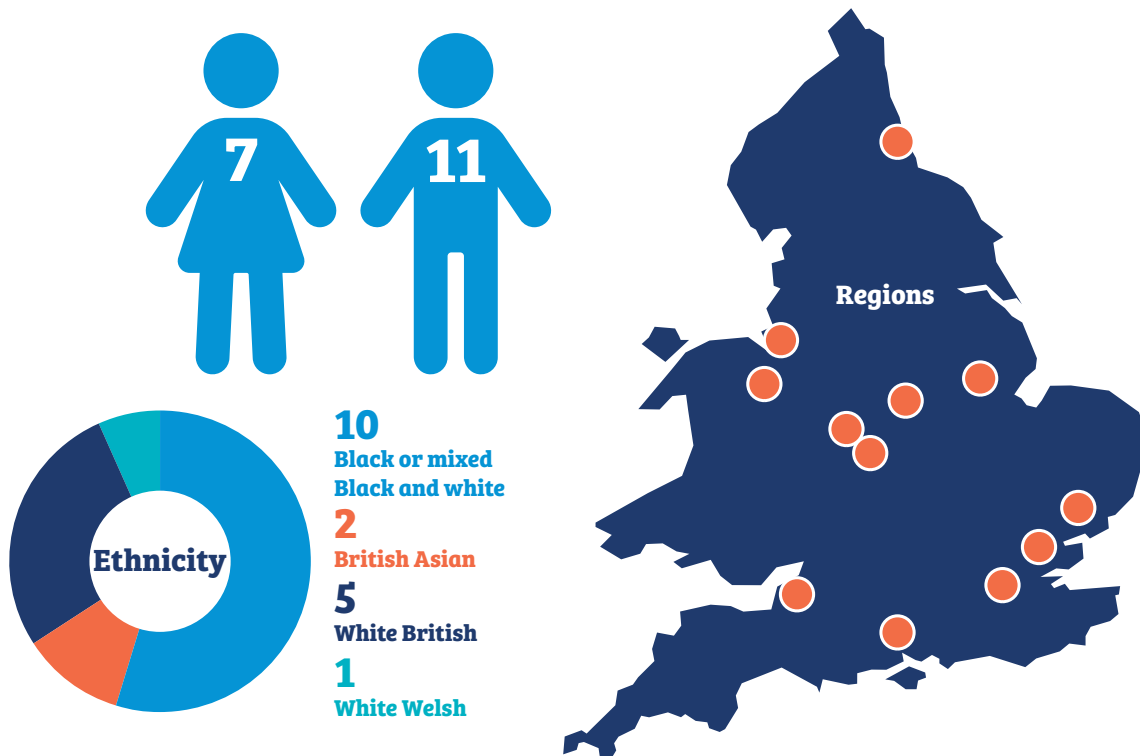
From the start, the project has been driven by the Young Advocates, enabling them to lead the research, gather the findings and put forward solutions to the issues they identify.

About the Young Advocates

The Young Advocates are a diverse group of talented and tenacious 13-to-21-year-olds, each with experiences of the youth justice system. In this definition of ‘experience’ we include pathways into the system such as school exclusion, criminal exploitation, victimisation, violence and interactions with different stages of the system including policing, Youth Offending Teams (YOT), courts and custody. They use their previous and ongoing experiences, of and after the justice system, to affect change on the issues that are most important to them.

The group was established in July 2020, originally with 6 core members. Since then, the core group has been directly involved in recruiting more young people to expand the reach of the project, including friends, family and peers involved in other youth projects. Over this period, the group grew to a height of 18 Young Advocates; with representation as follows:

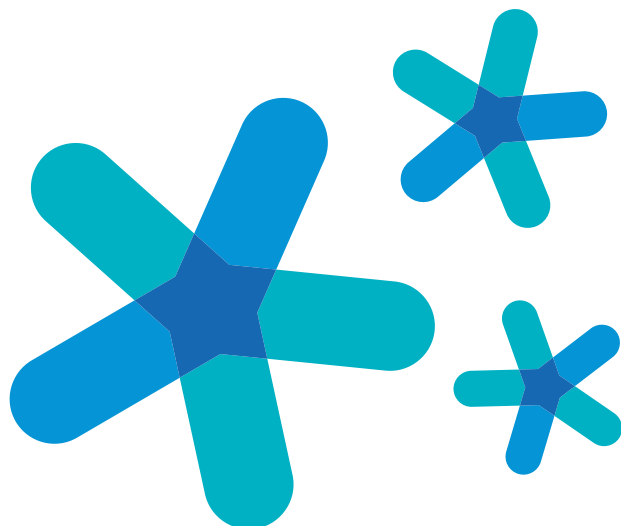
- **Gender:** 11 boys; 7 girls
- **Ages:** Between 13 and 21
- **Ethnicity:** 10 Black or mixed Black and white, 2 British Asian, 5 White British, 1 White Welsh
- **Regions:** Birmingham, Bristol, Essex, Lincolnshire, Liverpool, London, Nottingham, Southampton, Suffolk, Sunderland, Wolverhampton, Wrexham.



In January 2022, the Young Advocates published their first [youth-led report from children and young people with experience of the system](#), which shared insight from over 120 children and young people from across England and Wales on issues around *Stereotyping, Education and Warning Signs* and *Jails*.

Since then, the group has been busy, working to expand the reach of their efforts, by prioritising:

- **Targeted engagement of children and young people** who have had or are in **direct contact with the youth justice system** specifically. This is a group that is severely underrepresented in conversation and decision-making related to the justice system, despite having rich, first-hand knowledge and understanding of the way things work and what will help others avoid similar situations.
- **Engaging with criminal justice professionals from the local to the national level.** Including youth justice services, civil servants, and parliamentarians, the group prioritised being visible and vocal at every level of decision-making to embed insight and affect change. This reflected the importance placed on lived-experience issues being understood by as many professionals responsible for the safety, wellbeing and success of criminalised children and young people as possible.
- **Supporting each other's personal development and progression** face to face and remotely. In Young Advocates meetings, within engagement sessions, training together, and beyond, the encouragement and support of individuals from within and across the group has been an invaluable asset and incentive for the team to remain committed, confidently respond to and process personal challenges and keep the bigger picture in mind.
- **Expanding the project's reach to the children's secure estate** – Since the beginning of the project in 2020, we've had members of the group taking part either whilst in a secure setting or following their experiences of custody. These Young Advocates have always been motivated to expand the project's reach and enhance the experience for those taking part from a secure setting. Recently, this has included introducing hybrid meetings, taking our workshops and recruitment to secure children's homes, and even hosting one of our regular group meetings at the current secure placement of a teammate.





About this report

This report from the Young Advocates for Youth Justice has been co-produced by children and young people with first-hand experience of the youth justice system, with the support of the AYJ and Leaders Unlocked. The report presents findings and recommendations from engagement with 90 children and young people with experience of the youth justice system from across England and Wales, that took place in 2023.



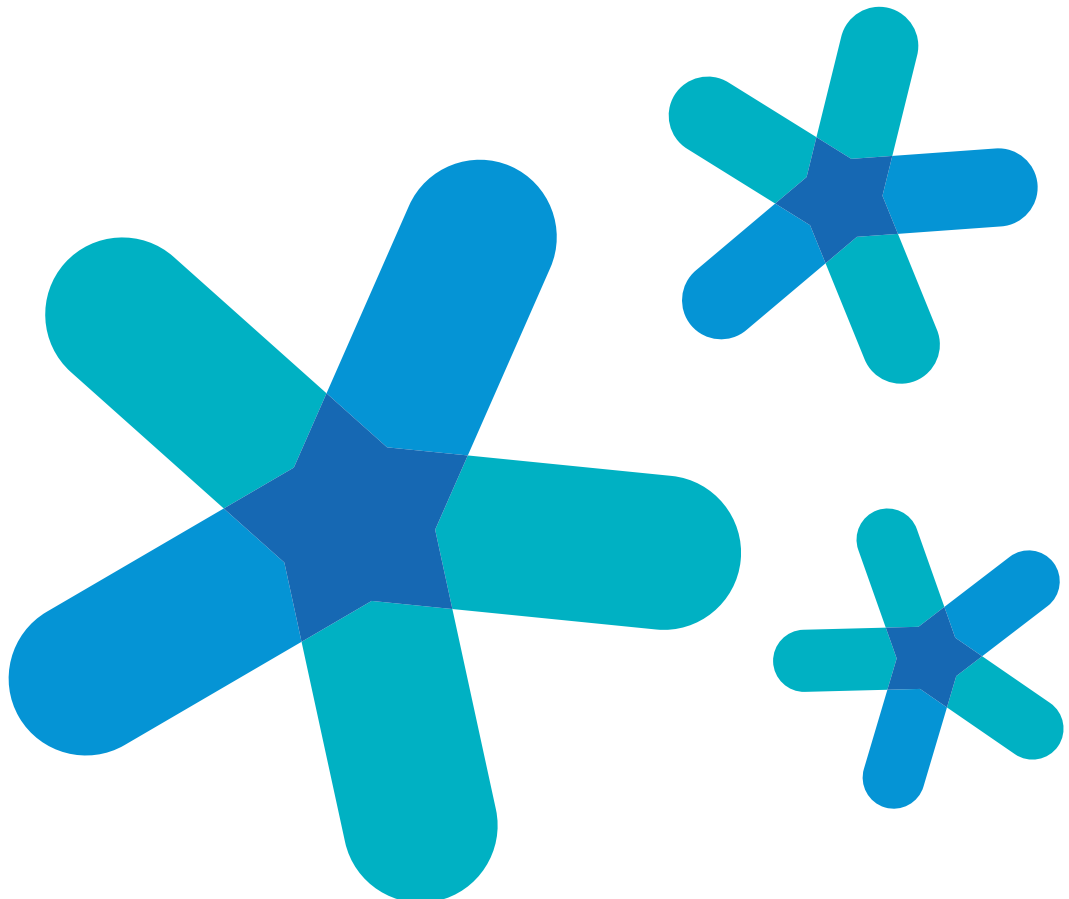
Acknowledgements

The report is co-authored by and draws on the immeasurable work of the Young Advocates: Adam, Dajon, Jodie, Joen, Laiba, Leon, Marcel, Maya, Mia, Serena, Sian, Tashayna, Tayte, Tranai and Tyler. Special thanks go to every child and young person who participated in the peer research and shared their views and experiences with us.

We would like to extend a massive thank you to BBC Children in Need for their support of this project for the past 3 years.

We are grateful for the support of a wide range of national partners who have supported the project. We extend particular thanks to those who have been involved in directly supporting the Young Advocates and their participation in the project, offered the group opportunities to contribute to their ongoing work, and those who facilitated consultation with the children and young people in their organisations:

Aldine House, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Children in Police Custody, Children and Young People Now, Children's Rights Alliance for England, East Midlands Experts by Experience, Haringey Learning Partnership, HMPPS, HMP YOI Peterborough, HMP YOI Parc, Home Office, Lincolnshire Secure Unit, National Appropriate Adult Network, NHS England Managed Clinical Advisory Group (MCAG), Ministry of Justice, Magistrates' Association, Southampton Youth Justice Service, Stockport Youth Justice Service, Street Doctors, Youth Endowment Fund, Warwickshire Youth Justice Service and Wrexham Youth Justice Service.





When I first heard about the Young Advocates, I was involved with the Youth Offending Team (YOT) and was doing my last session with them when my YOT worker mentioned a volunteer group whose aim was to better the youth justice system. Once I heard this, I immediately knew that this is something I wanted to do. I knew this because I knew the youth justice system is something that needs improving and changing. I wanted to be a part of that change, no matter how small my part would've been. I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to join such an amazing group.



The past nearly four years have been amazing. The things I have been able to do and be a part of are things that I will always be grateful for. I have been able to do things I never thought I would ever do. A few highlights of my time with the Young Advocates are:

- 1. Our first meeting in person, because it was the first time that we all got to meet in-person and really get to know one another.*
- 2. When we had our first residential, we got to know each other more and spend even more time together. This was especially exciting because the following day we went to a prison to run our workshop, and this was my first time in a prison with the Young Advocates, and the whole experience was something I'd never done before.*
- 3. Getting to go to Parliament was something that I never thought I'd get to experience, and I am so glad and lucky that I did. I felt like my voice really mattered in there and that they cared about what I had to tell them about my experience.*

Overall, my time with the Young Advocates have been the best years of my life.

Jodie, 20 years-old, Founding Member of the Young Advocates (2020-24)

What we did

Choosing priorities

This year, the aim was to go beyond our first round of findings and gather in depth insight from a group often excluded from research and participation – children in the youth justice system.

We came together over several months to review what we'd learnt so far and where we could go deeper. After highlighting the extent to which stereotyping was seen and felt in our last report, and the journeys some children go on to end up in custody, we wanted to explore the routes into the justice system for young people, as compared to pathways out and away from it. Our priorities were:

- **Criminalisation:** A process whereby acts become seen and treated as criminal, through public perception, legislation and law enforcement.
- **Policing:** The first contact most children have with the justice system and law enforcement.
- **Intervention and Diversion:** Things that can help young people avoid the justice system.

Designing peer research

Our group researched current cases in the news relating to each priority and were supported by Leaders Unlocked and the AYJ to deepen our understanding of the policy context of our chosen topics on a deeper level. We then worked together to design peer research materials to capture a range of responses from children and young people aged 12–25 years old, using a mixture of:

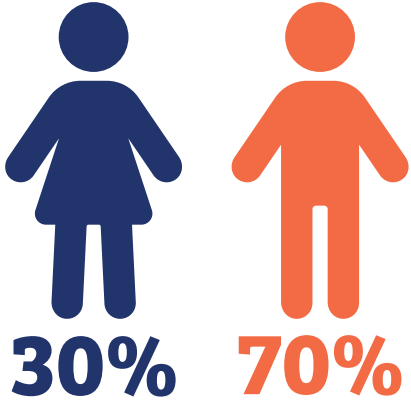
- **Group workshops** – which are always peer-led, interactive, and involve open group discussions and private reflections. This year we focused on tailoring the experiences to the group by age, gender, region and experiences, and for the first time we held conversations in secure settings.
- **Online survey** – together we adapted our core questions across the priorities and launched our first online survey. This was shared with contacts across the youth justice and community partners, to be completed independently or during one-to-ones with key workers.

Delivering peer research

We ran our second phase of peer research between March-December 2023. We held 10 workshops and gathered over 20 survey responses, altogether speaking to 90 children and young people aged between 12-25 with experience of the youth justice system. These participants were from across England and Wales, including London, Wrexham, Nottingham, Lincolnshire, Sheffield, Peterborough, Birmingham, Bristol, Essex, Leicester, Southampton. Nearly half of the young people who took part in the peer research self-identified as having additional mental and/or physical health needs.



- 40** Black or Mixed
- 30** White British
- 8** British Asian
- 6** Prefer not to say
- 3** Romanian
- 3** White Asian



Priority 1

Criminalisation

Criminalisation is the process where behaviour is seen and treated as being in conflict with the law. In schools, the community and in the justice system, **the process of labelling and criminalisation unfolds when the actions of children and young people are associated with criminality and treated as such.** This can happen based on things in and outside of your control. We have experienced differential treatment and attracted negative attention from professionals and police for a range of things, including the size and demographic makeup of the group, and peer or familial associations.

We wanted to hear from our peers across the country about their experiences of being or feeling treated like a criminal and find out where this happens, both in and outside of the justice system. It was also important to us that we increased young people's understanding of what criminalisation is while exploring its impacts, and creating space to develop ideas to change harmful outcomes that can come from a child being criminalised.



Key Findings



Young people are put under suspicion due to their age, associations and ‘the group’ and most targeted due to race and nationality. Intersectionality significantly impacts targeting and treatment

Negative stereotype-driven, long-term labelling continues to be a trust-eroding issue across many of the services that young people access. Common aspects of childhood and adolescence – travelling to and from school, being with friends or family, and changes in appearance or style – are perceived as suspicious and often amplified by the specific demographic characteristics of those involved. This is reportedly felt regarding treatment by schools, policing, social and mental health services, as well as extending to portrayals of youth in mainstream media.

The young people we spoke to repeatedly suggested race, nationality, and perceived age as reasons for unequal treatment. This makes experiences of labelling, targeting and criminalisation feel indistinguishable from each other, and has a cumulative impact. However, children and young people’s age, associations and groups were most frequently mentioned as being penalised and punished in their day to day lives. These broad categories allow for even more opportunities to be labelled for children and young people who are also racialised or otherwise marginalised.

Young people told us that targeting of their social lives is partly related to perceptions of young people and why they are viewed this way. There is a sense that ‘good news doesn’t sell’ and stories from and about social media show inaccurate portrayals of youth culture, allowing for a generation to be generalised.

“ *So many news channels will label a black child as a black criminal but when it’s a white child they’re just a child.* ”

“ *They just didn’t want me there.* ”

“ *School does it too, they think because I’m Romanian there’s something wrong.* ”

“ *My school it was no groups bigger than 5, they’d break up groups.* ”

“ *You don’t really see police looking for adults, if they see adults, they don’t suspect them of things.* ”

“ *...If I’m walking alone, I’ll be okay, but I’ll be walking with a couple guys and it’s a different story.* ”

This initial picture shows us that multiple things that young people cannot control about their circumstances interact to impact on how they are treated by systems. This intersectionality helps us understand all our findings on a deeper level.



There is a perception that girls are treated less harshly by the justice system, except when they are Black

Most of the children and young people we spoke to generally perceived girls to be criminalised less than their male peers. Most boys also commented that they had never seen or heard of a girl be stopped and searched.

“ Girls are less threatening as a human, not likely to see a female to be dangerous, seen as less likely to have an altercation.

“ I’ve been in PRUs and been arrested and the female I was with got sent home.

These experiences were also reflected by some of the girls we spoke to:

“ I’ve been in situations, in groups and they always question the guys first if it’s not that, police feel they have to detain boys more often than us.

However, this picture is often different for Black girls. Black and brown girls and young women we spoke to shared experiences of being treated with more suspicion than other girls and disproportionately targeted by teachers, police and in public life. This unequal treatment was described as continuing throughout the system, up to and inside custody, as described by the girls below.

“ What looks like a ‘resting bitch face’ on a black girl looks like something different on someone else...

“ We all got arrested one time, one of the boys they stripped him, they stopped me they said they’re looking for a girl with braids and I don’t have them.

“ You’re always on basic regime with no tv.



A: I’ve not seen girls get arrested like boys do so I can’t speak on it, definitely happens I think but if there’s a girl and a boy, done the same crime same context she gets less.

B: Imagine a girl and a boy, Black girls are going to get sentenced harsher than white boys.

C: I think with boys it’s the same, I’ve seen it happen Black guy booted in the head they chased the white guys but not with that much effort.

Extract from conversation during a workshop between three *non-black* children in a Secure Children’s Home



The needs of girls and women are being missed, overlooked and criminalised

Many respondents expressed fear about the repercussions of being honest with social services when discussing a range of age, gender, and other additional needs. Many of the girls and young women we spoke to mentioned that social and care services often feel like an extension of the criminal justice system, if not a gateway into it. Girls and young women, particularly those in or with experience of custody, shared that often going through temporary periods of difficulty and asking for help during these times can be used against you in the short and long term. Examples included experiences of issues with pregnancy, parental-related mental health, domestic violence, housing issues, medical problems and interaction with social services.

“ Having social services involved in your life can make you be dishonest.

“ Sometimes receiving support can get you criminalised.

“ If you say you're self-harming, you lose your job.

Another concerning example of girls' needs not being taken seriously came from some girls that we spoke to, who had experiences of reporting sexual harassment and assaults to teachers in mainstream secondary schools and had been made to feel blamed and uncomfortable despite being the victim, particularly by some of their male teachers. We believe these experiences are likely to be more common for girls and young women, and ultimately lead to them underreporting when they are a victim of crime, particularly sexual offences, throughout their later life. This was also echoed in multiple references that were made to recent allegations of police sexual misconduct and violence against women.

“ It was very victim blaming if boys tried to touch you and you report it, the teachers wouldn't believe you or they'd say maybe you shouldn't wear makeup to school.



Many boys and young men are being denied and detached from the status of 'victim' which limits their access to support

Almost all the boys and young men we spoke to mentioned the stigma around mental health issues and expressing emotions when it comes to young males. This severely reduces access to support from the very systems that originally deny them the status or label of 'victim'. Boys' warning signs are often missed, misinterpreted, or punished as a result and can continue throughout their interaction with systems. For example, displays of self-harm, body dysmorphia and presentations of trauma and PTSD are dismissed as displays of violence, masculinity, and aggression. This results in negative emotions being bottled up and an eventual outburst over something that could appear to be 'small'. This idea of a hidden picture of boys' emotional experiences also emerged in our survey responses, where boys were more likely to answer 'no' or skip the question related to whether they had had a crime or crimes committed against them.

“ *Boys mental health is definitely not taken as seriously. When I show emotion, they downplay it, I’m ‘trying to get attention.’* ”

“ *Boys are seen as more aggressive, because they are bigger and stronger physically.* ”

“ *Men are supposed to be big strong characters, we can’t have sad emotions.* ”

Recommendations



Decriminalise and destigmatise victimhood – increase knowledge of culture and discrimination

- **Government should invest in non-criminal educational programmes related to emotional management, healthy relationships, consent, survivorship and loss.** Mental health support should be automatically offered to all boys and young men in the justice system and more attention should be paid to the language at the centre of this – with conscious reframing and approach to the ‘victim’ status. Black girls need access to their own therapeutic, social and support spaces that create room for processing and healing harm from direct and indirect contact with the justice system. These should be funded, online and physical safe havens.
- **Department for Education should introduce peer to peer mental health first aid models** and mentoring training at secondary schools across the country, to enhance the accessibility and qualitative of positive support over time.
- **Department for Education and Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport to train teachers, youth and community workers and other professionals in contact with children** to recognise and respond to behaviour that could be viewed/labelled as antisocial, and deepen understanding of the range of potential causes and triggers.



Redefine and establish senses of safety

- **Department for Education to work with schools to increase transparency, reporting and publication of safety statistics.** Data about bullying, harassment, assault, violence of a sexual nature and resulting suspensions, must be made publicly available and provided to local authorities. There is also scope for an open Consultation or Independent Review by often at the national level to assess the size and nuances of these issues. Girls and young women need knowledge of and access to an anonymous space to report sexual harassment or assault whilst in schools, and access support for this. This should be nationally available, widely available, and should contribute to providing a more accurate picture of what school is like for girls in 2024.

Priority 2

Policing

Policing is often the most talked about stage of the justice system, since police officers are meant to protect and serve the public and are often the first experience someone has with the justice system. Many of us have had lifechanging interactions with the police and often these take place during childhood, so we believe significant attention should be paid to how children are 'policed'. Conversations about policing often exclude the voices of those in or with direct experience of the justice system, whose lives have been most affected by police interactions. So, with this priority we wanted to hear from these children and young people about their experiences and the impacts of policing – in schools, communities, home and social life. We wanted to explore whether young people had experienced different treatment when viewed as a victim versus as a suspect. Importantly, we were keen to develop experience-based training, guidelines and proportionate consequences for police misconduct, with those most affected by it.



Key Findings



Accountability of the police is severely disproportionate to the increasing levels of power they have

All the children and young people we spoke to agreed that the police in England and Wales have too much power, and not enough accountability. Some young people could acknowledge that they had experienced fewer negative interactions with police officers than others they know. There is increasing cultural significance in the numerous cases of police sexual misconduct and brutality in the news, and a heightened sense of fear and frustration that no consequences have been seen for officers involved.

“ *My experiences have not been good. I feel like they abuse their power and look down on me. Rather trust the community, policing has become just a job title, terrible.* ”

“ *Police discriminate against me but it's different for everyone.* ”

“ *The police have never made me feel safe before so they wouldn't make me feel safe in school.* ”



Young people do not feel safe from police officers, even at home

Most young people reported that second to out in the community, the place they see police officers most frequently is at home. This was a somewhat surprising finding. These interactions leave mental and physical reminders that a safe space that has been violated, through property damage, parental criminalisation, and PTSD. These experiences are often distressing for an entire family and often increases pressure on the children involved.

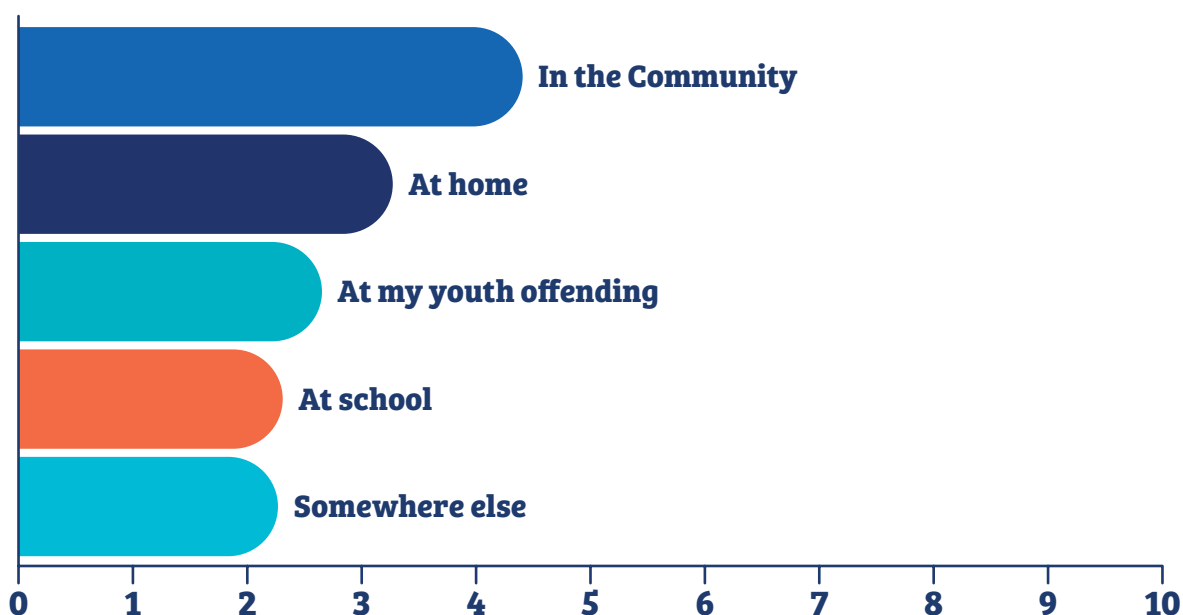
Perhaps less surprisingly, respondents to our survey shared **strong disagreement with the idea that police in schools would increase feelings of safety**, and strongly agreed that the presence of police changes where they go. This raises a worrying question about where children at risk of violence, exploitation or exposure to criminal behaviour can go to feel truly safe.

“ *My experiences with the police haven't been good. They have come to my house several times with excessive force that was not needed... had my mum on the floor, crying and haven't given the support to fix the damage they have done to the house.* ”

“ *This is an opportunity to tell them that, people feel whatever they say or do will be twisted and used against them.* ”

“ *Knowing that most people don't like them is important and should affect how they do their job.* ”

Where do you mostly see police officers?



Where force is used against children, they reported experiencing police using an unreasonable amount

Findings from our survey sample show that children and young people who are subjected to use of force by police report that this is experienced to an excessive degree. This limits development of meaningful, trusting relationships with police, while reproducing disdain and fear in communities. Future policing interactions that rely on compliance are impacted by these experiences, as well as the cases of use of force against children that had recently appeared in the news.

“ No tasers, pepper spray or spit hoods; why? How can I trust the people that have tased me? ”

“ You shouldn’t want to strip-search us, and you shouldn’t do it for the smallest things. ”

“ Being kicked out of school and now ending up in prison, I’m seen as a bad kid... when they damage your house and taser little girls? To gain trust we need to see they’re being held accountable... ”

Recommendations

- **Independent Office for Police Conduct to review all complaints filed against a police officer made by or regarding children, with no exceptions.** This will accurately reflect the long-term harm that police misconduct does to children, and specifically work to increase trust and confidence in the accountability of the police.
- **Home Office to require police forces to report the nature and impact of police entries and interactions in the home, recorded as an extension of use of force.** Compensation and reimbursement and therapy should be available where there has been property damage, and significant emotional distress.
- **Home Office to require police forces to reduce the presence of police in schools.** This would be consistent with majority reports that police presence already decreases feeling of safety of children in the community, in the home and would only succeed in creating these feelings to school.
- **Home Office to ban the use of tasers on children and the practice of strip-searching children by police officers.** The physical and physiological safety of children should always be prioritised. The Young Advocates recognise the health and safeguarding risks to children when they have internally ingested drugs, and the increased risk that this will happen when they fear they will be searched by police. Intimate searches of children should only ever be conducted by paediatric medical professionals, in child-friendly medical settings. This would increase checks and balances around intimate searches, and increase opportunities to engage with hospital and social care based interventions.



The Home Office must urgently rollout training requirements and the College of Policing and National Policing Chiefs Council must improve training on the following training modules:

- **Additional needs awareness and sensitivity (Trauma, Mental and physical health) –** Young people we spoke to expressed a wish for greater police understanding of neurodiversity, disabilities and other crisis situations young people often encounter them in. In order for police officers to respond more appropriately to children in these interactions, they should receive compulsory training about children's needs and developmentally appropriate de-escalation techniques, language and communication, and trauma-informed responses.
- **Use of Force with Children and the Household –** Young people were largely unhappy with the nature and frequency of physical force used by police. Review and update procedures for police officers entering households that are likely to have a child present, as a matter of urgency. Children suggested that police officers could learn from the approaches taken by staff in Secure Children's Homes in the way they communicate with children to avoid conflict and restraint, and their use of de-escalation techniques.

The Young Advocates believe these modules should be co-produced with those with experience of use of force, in terms of both national guidance and locally-tailored training.

Advice TO young people FROM young people

When you're struggling

Get involved in activities you may become passionate about, so you don't completely lose yourself and your good qualities within

Stay strong

Speak to people

Do daily check ins to show support to friends and even family

Get involved with groups and keep yourself busy away from trouble

Pace yourself and don't race yourself

Talk to a trusted adult about how you're feeling to seek the right help. From my own experiences it's nothing to be scared or worried about

Find something to pass the time that you like to do and surround yourself with the right people

Get on a bike and turn around

Remember why you started

Attend school/college and community programs and clubs

Write down anything that may need to be communicated to support groups

Don't forget how valuable you are

Get some support to help you

I would probably suggest some mental health services, and get help to guide them through this rough patch



Priority 3

Intervention and Diversion

Intervention and diversion can be anything that is offered to help a child or young person change difficult circumstances and avoid the justice system. This can occur before, during and after contact with the system and is often what makes all the difference in a young person's life. We know firsthand the impact one individual or activity can have to help you change your life for the better, so we wanted to know what is working currently and how others that go without can 'slip through the cracks'. We wanted to explore what is most important to consider when developing interventions for individuals at risk of or living with the impacts of contact with the justice system, and hear more from those who have experienced exclusion from education. For this priority we specifically visited local youth justice services to run workshops and invited young people to complete our survey during one-to-one meetings, supported by their caseworkers.



Key Findings



No one is responsible or held accountable for children that are excluded from education and the increased harm they face

Schools and education providers continue to have the most significant and clear responsibility for providing support to children and young people and identifying if problems are starting to emerge. Many of the children and young people we spoke to said that their schools were quick to suspend or exclude them, and rarely willing to take responsibility, labelling students a 'bad child' out of fear of being labelled a 'bad school'. Following experiences of being suspended, even for short periods, a strong sense of ongoing powerlessness in the face of injustice remained. Often an unknown threshold was met meaning they could not return to their school and most other schools would no longer take them. This was especially frustrating when considering widely publicised penalties for parents whose children do not attend schools. We know that being out of school increases a child's vulnerability to criminal and other exploitation, but what is perhaps less talked about, that we learned from our conversations, is the impact it has on self-esteem and the gap felt in comparison to peers.

“ My school wouldn't do anything unless they were ordered to by some service like CAMHs or Youth Justice, they'd never take my mums concerns seriously.

“ My social worker could've been a lot better, she put no effort into getting me back into school and now it's been ages, over 4 months I can't even do simple maths anymore.

“ They had no reason to kick me out. Then they said 'You're out for 15 days'... then 'You're not allowed back', they 'don't want me back'. But because I haven't been properly kicked out, they won't put me anywhere else.



Having at least one positive role model and a positive activity to be involved in are vital for a child's success

Outside of long-term access to education, we found that having both a positive role model and a positive activity to be regularly involved in are most needed to help a child to avoid the justice system initially and after prior contact. The interventions most commonly experienced by the children and young people we spoke to were mentoring and sports; these were also the most positively reported on. However, this reliance on sports likely disadvantages girls who are less likely to be catered for and access sports-based interventions. It is likely the inverse is also true with more traditionally 'therapeutic' interventions targeted towards girls and therefore underserving boys. Similarly, respondents told us that peer-to-peer relationships, and environments that reinforce the positive version of oneself, are what will make all the difference when going through a difficult time.

“ We need more activities and social stuff to do that's why we're always getting caught up in stuff in town.

“ **Youth clubs, Black role models, talks at schools, upping minimum wage for young people, job offers to young people, cheaper sports fees / free sports, support workers that have actually experienced trauma.**

“ **'Different schools have different tolerance for what it takes to get excluded – PRU have no tolerance, e.g. you could get excluded for being late. They'd make the girls do make-up on a certain day and the boys would do sport.**

➤ **Experiences of therapy were often viewed as positive and a significant contributing factor to understanding behaviour and how to change this**

Experiences of CAMHS however were mostly negative, sometimes doing more harm than good. It is not clear whether this is related to the widely known under-funding and high caseloads in these services, or a result of children feeling that CAMHS was forced upon them and therefore not necessarily an appropriate intervention.

“ **I found my counselling/therapy helpful because I opened up more to someone not involved in my problems and knew they couldn't judge me on what I said or was feeling.**

“ **Mentoring or having someone that keeps you level-headed no matter the circumstances.**

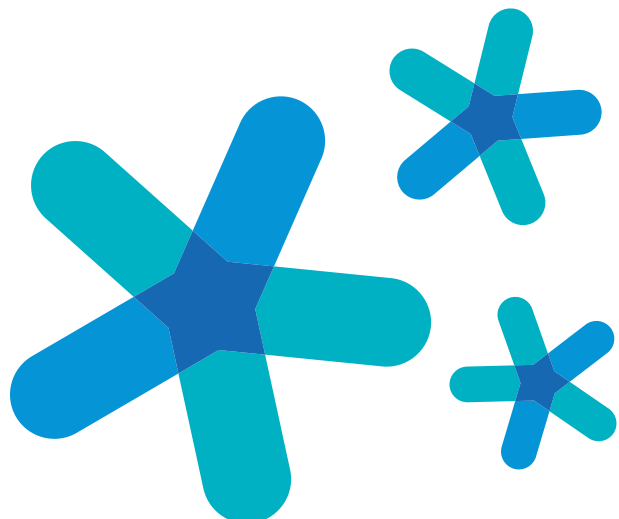
“ **I think sport has been my longest background and I find when you can relate to something it is easier to take people's minds off things with a game of sport, whatever it may be.**

➤ **Some children and young people are missing out on the interventions they need**

A small minority of the children and young people we surveyed reported having had no experience of interventions, this was a bittersweet finding. The intervention that had been accessed the least was support for substance use such as marijuana, alcohol or drugs. This is an area that should be explored further as many conversations we had highlighted drug use as impacting and affected by mental health decline. Lots of responses we heard from young people were negative, that they have felt judged by professionals or as though they feel like they do not care about them. However, understanding the aims and benefits of various interventions seemed much greater in hindsight, with more concrete details and context available from those that had finished an order some months or years ago. We also know that there are many more invisible children that we were unable to speak to, currently missing or unknown to services who are being failed.

Recommendations

- **All bodies with a duty of care must be held accountable by the Department for Education if a child is not given sufficient alternative education options** or if the school's suspension procedures limit a child's chance to be accepted into alternative education. This consequence could be relative to the period a child is out of education. Schools, headteachers, governors and others **involved in suspension and exclusions** must be responsible for children **until they are placed in another educational setting**.
- **Ministry of Justice to ensure all children exposed to the justice system have access to at least one positive role model and one positive activity** to be involved in on a regular basis, at every stage of their journey. This recognises that the change seen when moving away from a life involving crime can be gradual and allows children and young people to renew and reaffirm their positive identity every day.
- **Ministry of Justice to widen the selection of activities most offered to children affected by the justice system to be more equitable and responsive.** This means moving beyond sports-based that often exclude girls, those with physical disabilities or interests in arts or academia. Destigmatising, incentivising and gamifying mental health and wellbeing to increase accessibility for boys.
- **Information about support sought and accessed should not be shared or criminalised where it does not relate to future harm to the child,** parent or anyone else. There must be multiple, ongoing opportunities provided by a range of organisations, in a variety of ways to share and ask for help before it gets too much for any child or young person.
- **Department for Health and Social Care to provide more funding for better, local, person-centred therapeutic services,** as CAMHS is not fit for purpose. Professionals overseeing and affecting children and young people's mental wellbeing must be culturally informed, and increasingly embedded in communities.
- **Ministry of Justice should work to ensure as much as possible peer to peer facilitation is used,** and all youth justice related organisations prioritise recruiting and retaining lived-experience workers, to support positive role-modelling and offer a rare relatability in experience.





I was interested in joining the Young Advocates because I was involved in some bad stuff in my past which led me to be where I am now. I wanted to help young people not make the mistakes I have but also, I wanted to have a bit more of a say in the decision-making that affects my life.

I've learned a lot more about myself as a person; I've learned that I have a passion for youth advocacy, I've also learned I'm quite good at it! I learned more about communicating, organising, time management. But also, I've learned a lot about the youth justice system along the way and its cracks, and that's what I'm trying to fill. I've matured a lot since joining and grown as a person. It's been an opportunity to do good things and now I'm seeing good things come out of it, so it's been worth it.

One highlight was training Warwickshire Youth Justice Service because of how open they were, how honest; you could see that they wanted to learn and change for the better and they saw that we were the people to help them do that.

It's been a great time so far, I've met some great people along the way, other Young Advocates, and professionals, I've enjoyed every minute and will remember this for the rest of my life. Hopefully this will set me up for a future in this kind of role.

Through my Strategic Internship at Leaders Unlocked, I am currently working to support young people transitioning through the secure estate. Young people come and go and their transition plans are usually unclear and rushed. I am designing a Transition Plan to help young people have more opportunities, not just whilst you are in a secure setting but also to help you have better chances of education and employment once leaving.

Tyler, 17, Young Advocate (2022-24)



Young Advocates influencing Policy and Practice



Giving evidence to the APPG on Children in Police Custody

On 25th April 2023, a selection of the Young Advocates attended the [first evidence session](#) of the [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\)](#) on Children in Police Custody's [Inquiry into Achieving the Rights of Children in Police Custody](#).

The cross-party parliamentary group, chaired by Janet Daby MP, consists of Members of the House of Commons and Lords working together to raise awareness of the experiences of children in police custody, and develop recommendations for ensuring that children's rights are respected and upheld in police custody. The evidence session was focused on hearing from children and young people, and the Young Advocates shared a range of their experiences, views and ideas for change regarding police custody.

Members of the group shed significant light on the reality of many children's interactions with police that is mostly unknown to MPs. This was a historic moment for the group and the project, and despite it being intense emotionally it was a proud moment to be able to represent hundreds of children across the country who have had traumatic experiences with police, particularly those who have been strip-searched.



I want to thank the Young Advocates who gave evidence to the APPG on Children in Police Custody for sharing their experiences. Listening to their stories and hearing their calls for change will always stand out to me as one of the most moving experiences I have had as a Member of Parliament.

Hearing their testimony was the first thing the APPG on Children in Police Custody did as part of its Inquiry into the Rights of Children in Police Custody. That is because we wanted to make sure young people's voices were at the heart of the APPG's work.

Their courage to call for change and to speak truth to those who have the power to enact change is inspiring. There is no doubt in my mind that our justice system would be stronger and more effective if the views and experiences of young people were part of the conversation.

Janet Daby MP, Chair of the APPG on Children in Police Custody

Advising on National Appropriate Adult Network training

In August, two of the Young Advocates attended a session led by AYJ member the [National Appropriate Adult Network \(NAAN\)](#) to learn about Appropriate Adults, the training that NAAN provides to its members, and to share their experiences of police custody. The information the Young Advocates shared has been used to make sure NAAN's training is most beneficial to adults supporting children in police custody.

The Young Advocates were given an overview of the current training for Appropriate Adults that NAAN delivers, which also contained some background information about the history of Appropriate Adults and why they are important. They learned about the difference between Appropriate Adults and other professionals who might advocate for children in the same settings – such as lawyers – and about some of the impacts of having a system that allows for both voluntary or paid Appropriate Adults.

“ I found the day to be thought provoking and I now have a better understanding of the Appropriate Adult's role. I particularly enjoyed meeting the team and learning from them. I also felt they valued and respected my input about what I believed an Appropriate Adult should look like.

Tyler, Young Advocate

The Young Advocates then fed back their experiences of police custody, and about their interactions with police and Appropriate Adults – including what worked well and what could be improved – and shared how NAAN's training could be adapted to ensure that Appropriate Adults are most effectively advocating for children's rights.

Their feedback included the importance of Appropriate Adults having confidence and control in the situation, so that pressure is removed from the child to have to make decisions about processes that they may not understand or be able to navigate when feeling anxious or scared. They shared that they appreciated the presence of adults who were able to be self-reflective and challenge their own biases such as racism, and have faith in the children they advocate for. They also emphasised the importance of having an Appropriate Adult available at all times, and discussed the advantages and disadvantages of having them as an embedded service in police stations.

The Young Advocates' input will be used to ensure that NAAN's training prepares Appropriate Adults to provide support that is as useful and compassionate as possible to children and vulnerable adults.

If you'd like to find out more about Appropriate Adults or the work National Appropriate Adult Network, more information can be found [here](#).

Youth Participation Consultancy with Youth Justice Services

To enhance their knowledge surrounding this priority and tailor their research materials to children under the care of youth justice services, this year the Young Advocates were paid as Youth Participation Consultants by both Stockport and Warwickshire Youth Justice Services – in March and July respectively. This half day training was co-designed by the group and covered what works about the Young Advocates model, how to make the experience and opportunity meaningful for every individual, and personal best practice experiences from professionals. The training was delivered to staff in all professional positions and included group work where the Young Advocates supported these colleagues to apply the knowledge learned to a specific upcoming Youth Participation idea planned for their service. Examples of feedback from these services are included below:

“ I felt it was relaxed safe environment to share our thoughts it was helpful to hear from the young advocates and their loved experiences and perspectives combining doing stuff all together and in smaller groups.

“ So good to have young advocates voice. They made the most valuable contributions because it is from experience.

“ ‘What worked well was being able to take input from those with experience and how they have felt working with professionals like us.

“ I felt it worked well was looking at it from a young person’s point of view and bringing into my role more.



Young Advocates developing interventions

Some Young Advocates are currently completing Strategic internships at Leaders Unlocked, developing specific interventions that speak to the solutions we discuss in this report.

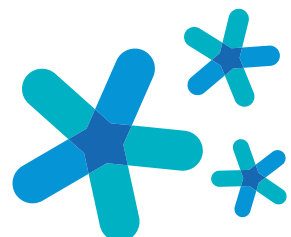


In a PRU you lose hope, you believe you're worthless and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Children in PRUs don't have those repeated routes out; criminal exploiters know this and use this. If those that do have your best interests don't give you ways out, those without the best intentions will...

I went to a PRU and what I experienced there was an extreme lack of support. We were all at risk of being exploited and in the end we all were. I didn't think it was fit for purpose, and something I found out later through doing this work was that children in PRUs are at a massive disadvantage in many other ways.

Since leaving the PRU and doing work with Leaders Unlocked I have developed my own project called The Long Game where I go into mainstream schools and Pupil Referral Units and use my lived experience to educate pupils and on grooming, exploitation, county lines. It's called The Long Game because this applies to those that exploit children and those that try to escape child exploitation. My hope is that everyone has an understanding of how to spot the warning signs of peer-on-peer grooming, debt bondage.

Adam, Creator of the Long Game and Founding Member of the Young Advocates (2020-24)



Another member of the Young Advocates project, Tranai, is the founder of [Support Through Sport](#), that was launched in Parliament in November 2021. This is a registered Community Interest Company (CIC) with a primary focus on empowering and improving the lives of young people within Nottinghamshire through a range of diversion and intervention programmes. They use positive initiatives such as sport, education and mentoring in an effort to engage young people and reduce negative influences including knife crime, gang violence and youth offending.

Under Tranai's leadership, Support Through Sport and its impact have grown significantly. He reflects on these achievements in this extract from their latest [Annual Impact Report](#):



“ Since establishing this organisation at the age of 17, wrestling with many of the challenges faced by our young people today, my motivation and passion for changing young people's lives through the power of sport, has only grown stronger. Compelled to make a difference, our collective work ethic has been simply unparalleled and two years on, I'm delighted to share with you our second annual impact report.

2023 has been a challenging year for us all, not least our children and young people. We've seen an unprecedented combination of societal, political and economic pressures, resulting in adversity for many children, young people and families. It's in times like these where driving forward positive change in our most vulnerable communities is increasingly difficult, but more imperative than ever.

At Support Through Sport, it's been a year of perseverance, continuous development and, most importantly, a year of immense impact for the thousands of young people we've supported. We've achieved so much over the past year, however we know that there is so much more to be done for our most disadvantaged children and young people. Reflecting on our impactful year, I'm filled with excitement and motivation to drive forward bold ambitions, striving for greater impact and further reach, as we venture into 2024. Our resilience in such challenging times, demonstrates a collective sense of passion and purpose with an immense motivation to reach our full potential. I'm filled with hope for a prosperous year ahead and continued success.

As ever, I'm extremely proud of what our team have achieved and especially grateful to all of our partners and funders, enabling us to create safer communities and build brighter futures, through the power of sport and youth work combined.

Tranai, Chief Executive and Founder of Support Through Sport, and Founding Member of the Young Advocates (2020-24)



Presenting the findings and recommendations

On Wednesday 28th February 2024, the Young Advocates held an online showcase to an audience that included Parliamentarians, senior officials, police officers, youth justice service practitioners, and organisations from across the voluntary and community sector. It was great to see a range of new audiences, as well as familiar faces from our periods of engagement.

We presented our key findings and recommendations for change and shared key messages about our time on the project. We reflected specifically on what we've learned about ourselves, how we've grown and developed, and what we are working on now. The Shadow Minister for Youth Justice, Janet Daby, and Chair of the Youth Justice Board, Keith Fraser, were invited to respond to our findings, and both echoed the importance of inclusion and leadership on this work extending to the children and young people most affected by the issues.

We also facilitated several smaller group discussions with attendees, where we were able to share and unpack the potential solutions in greater detail. We were delighted with the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the audience, and encouraged by the takeaway messages and actions that attendees took from the event.

Takeaways from attendees

“ I think it’s lovely to see the lived experience of the youth advocates shared and integrated with the project. Thank you all, this is really valuable work!

“ I think these messages are good for ministers and civil servants to hear – but also professionals in the sector.

“ I’m really impressed with the YA’s confidence – and their passion.

“ The importance of letting young people lead conversations on the issues that impact on them and matter to them most.

“ Recommendation to end strip searches for children. Need to give professionals a practical alternative to safeguard any child they think may have a weapon/drugs (so adults don’t use them as mules).

“ Amazing work. Exciting to know that young people’s voices are beginning to be heard. As a Domestic Abuse Lived Experience project Officer and this has given me lots to think about to bring to the work I do.

“ I’m struck by how confident, fluent, and knowledgeable the speakers have been. It’s important that your voices are heard.

“ Professionals need to really engage more with young people – and listen to them and act on what they hear.

“ The stories from the young people are invaluable to progress services. Government need to hear this and guarantee and protect funding for more services especially third sector / health services / YJS.

“ Ensure appropriate adult training includes content to ensure they understand children’s experiences and views of the police e.g. use of force before they see the child in custody.

“ Professionals need to work harder to reinforce young people’s sense of self-esteem. Focus on strengths and potential.

“ Our young people are experts by experience; they should be seen as such and treated as such. Not only will this empower them but ultimately they are the best ones to show us how we can be better!

“ We will work to ensure we work even more with young people to support our thinking and our actions.

“ The on the ground power of empowering young people and how quickly they are learning outside of mainstream education when it is done correctly. I will be taking youth voice more seriously.

What's next?

Thank you for taking the time to read our report.

The AYJ and Leaders Unlocked are keen to further develop the Young Advocates project in the years ahead, building on their successes in terms of peer research, advising policy makers, practitioner training and developing new interventions. We will be exploring new funding avenues for the future of the project and would be keen to hear from potential partners and supporters.



Stay up to date

To keep up to date with all the work from the AYJ and Leaders Unlocked, including that of the Young Advocates, make sure you check out our websites and socials:

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