



Speech

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Improving outcomes for children at risk of reoffending – latest assessment of performance

Good morning and thank you very much for inviting me to speak at today's event. It is always a pleasure to have the chance to speak with practitioners, and to learn from you, so thank you for giving me the opportunity today.

I am asked to provide the latest assessment of performance, of how successful those in the system are at improving outcomes for children at risk of re-offending. In one significant sense it can be said to be very successful indeed – when one looks at trends in the rate of *offending*. The youth justice system is dealing with significantly fewer children, thankfully. We have seen the numbers entering the system fall by over 80% since 2007, and the number prosecuted by almost 70%.

But what about *reoffending*? Proven re-offending has increased by 3.6 percentage points to almost 38% since 2003. So it is a moot point, a pertinent question: to what extent is the wider youth justice system delivering well enough when it comes to reducing reoffending?

It is argued of course that those children in the youth justice system now are different to those of the past, as the police and youth offending services have increasingly sought to deal informally with minor offending by children. It is harder to turn those remaining away from crime, and indeed when appearing before the Justice Select Committee towards the end of his term as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, Nick Hardwick spoke of a very troubled and troubling group of children now detained in prison.

Among the children now in the youth justice system are high numbers of black, Muslim and white working class boys; many are in care, and mental and other health problems and learning difficulties are common. Many come from chaotic or dysfunctional families where drug and alcohol misuse, physical and emotional abuse and offending is common.

Turning these children away from offending is no easy task. Around 41,000 children were cautioned, convicted or released from custody in the year July 2013 to June 2014 and around 15,000 of them have since been convicted of a further offence, up 1.2 percentage points from the previous twelve months. Those released from custody were more likely to be reconvicted – their proven re-offending rate was almost 68% - but interestingly the reconviction rate for this group is falling steadily, and has fallen by over 7% since 2003.

There is one clear measure, in answer to the question posed – how successful is the system in improving outcomes for those children at risk of reoffending, indeed most at risk of reoffending. And this is despite the fact that resettling young people post custody is

challenging. With fewer young people in custody there are now fewer establishments and more young people are placed further from home. We have seen pockets of effective practice in the resettlement of young people but this is not system wide, as we reported in our 2015 resettlement thematic report. I am hopeful that the Taylor review will recognise this, and make proposals to address it.

In the autumn of this year we will complete a programme of inspection of all YOTS. By then we will have inspected every one, either in a full joint inspection, working alongside colleagues from other inspectorates, or else in our own short quality screenings. We are poised to review and report on our consolidated data and information, with a complete picture of the system as a whole, as it is and has been. That may be valuable, as things change – we will have benchmarks, both national and local.

But how are things looking so far? Well, recent short quality screening results have been encouraging – most especially in Northumberland, where just last week we reported that initial outcomes in the cases that we inspected showed that almost two-thirds of children or young people had not reoffended since being supervised by the YOT. Northumberland YOT is doing exceptional work with children and young people. We found all case managers were skilled, knowledgeable and committed to helping children and young people to make positive changes in their lives. They took pride in their work and were ambitious for the children and young people they worked with. We saw many examples of creative and innovative ways of working and an approach that celebrated the progress of children and young people. Work with parents/carers was well developed and Northumberland YOT's approach of delivering its work entirely in the community, rather than from an office, had a positive, significant impact on the quality of assessment and engagement. Management oversight was effective. The co-location of adolescent services with the YOT strengthened the effective case management approach.

Similarly in Gateshead last month, we found that work to reduce reoffending, to protect the public, protect children and young people, and to make sure sentences were served, was of very high quality. It was encouraging to see there that the work of the Youth Offending Team had improved substantially in all areas since our previous inspection in 2010. Staff were committed and enthusiastic, and they had a detailed knowledge of the children and young people they were working with. And I was struck by the reoffending rate for Gateshead: 32.6%, and better than the previous year and better than the England and Wales average of 37.8%.

Earlier in June we reported services in Norfolk were generally good. We recently reported much the same for Southend, and Bracknell Forest, a slightly more mixed picture in Somerset, Reading, and the Isle of Wight, but a less satisfactory picture in Barking and Dagenham.

So, our recent youth inspection results have been encouraging, despite all the uncertainties and the funding challenges that YOTS and others delivering youth justice services. I have no doubt that the work we have seen in recent inspections has contributed to, has led to children turning away from crime.

As we wait for the Taylor review and any changes in policy that will come from it, those working in the youth justice system are coping with uncertainty and getting on with the job. The changes that are to come are likely to be more significant for some YOTS than others, depending on how things work locally at the moment, and how well they are funded locally.

Whatever change is coming, there are always lessons from the past and the present to keep in mind, so that we go from strength to strength, taking the best from the past into the future, and for my part there are three things I suggest we consider, as we prepare for and then make the transition.

Recently we reviewed the effectiveness of practice in YOTS in supporting children's routes away from offending. We published our report, 'Desistance and Young People' in May, and I

commend it to you. We interviewed a good number of children (16 and 17 year olds) who had not reoffended for a period of 12 months or more after the end of their statutory supervision, to see what they thought worked for them. We also interviewed a similar number of those who had reoffended within 12 months of receiving a custodial or community sentence and their parents/key workers, to find and contrast their experiences.

You will be familiar with desistance theory, but the relative impact of the various factors that can make a difference for 16 and 17 years olds is not so clear in the research.

Not surprisingly, we found that as with adults, personalised approaches work best – those that take into account gender and ethnicity, for example. We found that effective methods for children and young people are age-appropriate, and based on a good understanding of the individual's needs, history and circumstances, for example Looked After status.

Most notably, those young people successful in desisting from crime laid great store on a trusting, open and collaborative relationship with a YOT worker or other professional, seeing it as the biggest factor in their achievement. This accords with the research for wider age groups.

Incidentally, young people persisting in crime who had experienced restorative justice had mixed views about it. In addition, some case managers were ambivalent about reparation work. Children and young people were sometimes slotted into existing projects that case managers thought unlikely to prove effective for the child or young person, and case managers reported far too much time spent 'pushing' children and young people through unpaid work, with enforcement action often a consequence.

Notably for these children and young people, unpaid work had been ineffective in promoting desistance despite the effort and cost involved in making it happen, whereas those who were successful in desisting crime generally had much more positive experiences of it. But the main point is this: the key relationship – whether it is with the case manager the nurse or whatever - it matters, and perhaps matters most, and we must bear it in mind as youth justice arrangements develop.

Secondly, although referral orders are the most common court order for children, and they are consistently more effective than other sentences, in that young people given a referral order are less likely to reoffend than those given other types of sentence (and this is so even taking into account that these orders are often given for a first and usually less serious offence) they could be more effective still.

In our recent report on referral orders we found that they were not always delivered well, and not as intended when they were first introduced. Instead, the elements of the contract agreed between the panel and the young person were often pre-determined by the case manager. The role of the panel was constrained unduly. And contracts tended to focus on interventions linked to the immediate cause of offending which whilst important were still backward facing rather than tailored efforts to understand what may help that child avoid offending in the future and be reintegrated into the community. Factors that may help reintegration – for example, improvements in education and changes in lifestyle – were not given enough priority.

So a second lesson from the past, to take into the future: those given a role in deciding what is best for a child, to help them turn away from crime, and given the responsibility of oversight of that child and progress must be given support in that role. They must not be unduly and inadvertently trammelled, even when that is done with the best of intentions. What is more, interventions need to focus on reintegration and the future rather than the past.

One last lesson from the past. Whatever the arrangements for youth justice, leadership matters most. As we have consistently reported, leadership and good governance make a difference to the quality of youth practice. We occasionally see reasonable performance

despite poor governance, but we do not see excellent practice unless we also see high quality governance, leadership and partnership.

So in summary, YOTs and the wider youth justice system are working hard and well, to make a difference to the rate of child reoffending. To continue to do this well as the system changes, and indeed to make the biggest difference to reoffending and children's lives, it is important we keep a steady focus on what works, and what the research and experience shows to be effective; it is ever more important that services are joined up, because of the multi-faceted nature of the problems children face; and good leadership and governance are essential if we want to be sure of success.

Thank you. Thank you very much for listening.

ENDS