

# Desistance and young people

*An inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation*

**May 2016**

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Published by:

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation

1st Floor Civil Justice Centre

1 Bridge Street West

Manchester

M3 3FX

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those without whose help, advice and cooperation this inspection would not have been possible. We are grateful to Dr. Monica Barry and Professor Fergus McNeill for their generosity in meeting with the lead inspector during the scoping phase of the inspection. Thanks are also due to Dr. Hannah Smithson who acted as our critical reader for this report.

Particular thanks must go to the staff and managers of the six Youth Offending Teams who we visited. We are especially grateful to all the children and young people and their parents/carers who participated in the inspection interviews.

<b>Lead Inspector</b>	Colin Barnes, <i>HMI Probation</i>
<b>Inspection Team</b>	Leigh Dunkerton, <i>Short term placement</i> Avtar Singh, <i>HMI Probation</i>
<b>HMI Probation Support Services</b>	Adam Harvey, <i>Support Services Officer</i> Pippa Bennett, <i>Support Services Manager</i> Oliver Kenton, <i>Research Officer</i> Alex Pentecost, <i>Communications Manager</i>
<b>HM Assistant Chief Inspector</b>	Alan MacDonald, <i>HMI Probation</i>

Please note – throughout this report all names referred to in the practice examples have been amended to protect the individual’s identity.

# Foreword

'Desistance is the process of abstaining from crime amongst those who previously had engaged in a sustained pattern of offending'<sup>1</sup>.

Desistance theories have had a growing influence on probation policy and practice with adult offenders. By contrast, there is more limited research and evidence about youth desistance and no unified, accepted definition. To add to the evidence base, we have assessed the effectiveness of practice in Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) across the main themes which desistance research has identified as being important in supporting children and young people's routes away from offending.

In recent years, YOTs statutory workloads have reduced significantly, as has their funding and often their continuity of staff. Alongside the paucity of research, those changes may well have affected the extent to which some YOTs are able to apply themselves to youth desistance, and do so skilfully. In this inspection we found that a small number of case managers clearly had an excellent grounding and understanding of desistance theory. They were able to reference relevant research and identify some of the key ideas and implications for practice. The majority of staff, however, were not schooled in desistance theory and were unclear about how key concepts and approaches could be applied.

In this report we confirm that as with adults, personalised approaches work best – those that take into account gender and ethnicity, for example. In this inspection 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.

Notably, those in our inspection successful in desisting from crime lay 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. We found that YOT workers generally worked hard at that, although it was not always possible to forge the relationship.

Those 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. 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 desisters generally had much more positive experiences of it.

We found some good desistance practice and some excellent exemplars. Our overall judgements, however, make discouraging reading. We found good work to build and sustain positive *relationships* with children and young people. We also found some evidence to suggest that the majority were being supported to *address structural barriers* (for example, exclusion from school). By contrast, the results across the other main desistance themes were much more disappointing, leading us to conclude that overall, work to support desistance was not sufficiently effective in most cases.

In addition, the views of former and current service users and their parents/carers expressed in this report are powerful, and provide practitioners and managers with an insight into how best to break the cycle of repeat offending.

Since the fieldwork was undertaken the Youth Justice Board and Youth Offending Services have continued the national implementation of the AssetPlus assessment and planning framework. Once this is completed, AssetPlus will help YOTs to personalise desistance support for children and young people. It is based on the principles of desistance theory, and it is likely to improve YOT practitioners' assessment and work with children and young people<sup>2</sup>. All members of staff in Youth Offending Services working with children

1 Maruna, S (2001) Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their lives. Washington, DC: APA Books.

2 The roll out began after our inspection fieldwork finished, and so we have not been able to evaluate its effectiveness.

and young people have completed, or are due to complete, the Assessment and Intervention Planning Foundation training module on the Youth Justice Interactive Learning System. This contains material about desistance theory, and the subsequent AssetPlus 'train the trainer' (classroom training) covers the practice application of desistance and recording within the YOT case management systems.

The Ministry of Justice is considering whether the current delivery models and governance arrangements for youth justice remain fit for purpose and achieve value for money. The departmental review is also examining evidence on what works to prevent youth crime and rehabilitate young offenders, and how this is applied in practice; how the youth justice system can most effectively interact with wider services for children and young people. We hope our inspection findings assist the review.

The review's February 2016 interim report has already highlighted the importance of improving educational outcomes for children and young people whether they are in custody or supervised in the community. We agree: effective engagement in education and training should be given greater emphasis in YOTs. That is consistent with a desistance focused approach. There are, however, other offending related factors to attend to, to increase the prospects of success. They include stimulating a child or young person's motivation to change, influence their lifestyle positively and addressing substance misuse. This inspection has highlighted some of the critical lessons to be learned if desistance theory is to become fully embedded in the delivery of youth offending services to children and young people.



**Dame Glenys Stacey**

*HM Chief Inspector of Probation*

*May 2016*

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# Summary of findings

## The inspection

The purpose of this inspection was to assess the effectiveness of practice in YOTs across eight domains which desistance research has highlighted as being significant in supporting children and young people's journeys away from offending. The eight domains are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They are:

1. building professional relationships, effective engagement and re-engagement, evidence of genuine collaborative working
2. evidence of engagement with wider social contexts, especially the family, but also peers, schools, colleges, work etc.
3. the active management of diversity needs
4. effectiveness in addressing key 'structural barriers' (exclusion from education, training or employment, lack of participation, lack of resources, substance misuse deficits, insufficiency of mental health services etc.)
5. creation of opportunities for change, participation and community integration
6. motivating children and young people
7. addressing children and young people's sense of identity and self-worth
8. constructive use of restorative approaches.

This inspection comprised of three main components:

- interviewing children and young people who had not reoffended for a period of 12 months or more after the end of their statutory supervision (desisters). This was to ascertain their perspective on what elements of supervision had been most and least helpful in achieving and maintaining a crime free lifestyle
- interviewing children and young people who had reoffended within 12 months of receiving a community or custodial sentence (persisters) and their parents/carers and key workers. The purpose of these interviews was to learn what elements of their supervision had acted as barriers to achieving a crime free lifestyle
- the assessment of existing service users' case records and documentation.

These sources of information and evidence were analysed in reflective case summaries which formed the basis for inspectors' judgements on the effectiveness of practice across the eight desistance domains.

Over the course of the fieldwork, inspectors met with 16 former service users. A total of 37 current service user cases were inspected with face-to-face meetings with 34 children or young people. We also interviewed 21 parents/carers and 2 key workers from children's homes.

## Key findings

Former service users identified the following aspects which had been most important in helping them move away from offending:

- a balanced, trusting and consistent working relationship with at least one worker. This was not necessarily the assigned case manager but was, in a number of cases, another professional within or, less frequently, outside the YOT
- meaningful personal relationships and a sense of belonging to family

- emotional support, practical help and where the worker clearly believed in the capacity of the child or young person to desist from offending
- the development of a strong relationship and/or becoming a parent
- changing peer and friendship groups
- interventions which provided problem solving solutions to use in day-to-day life situations
- well planned and relevant restorative justice interventions.

Although generally positive about their experiences with YOTs, former service users also indicated that some elements had been less helpful and had been barriers to moving away from offending. These included:

- formal offending behaviour programmes that did not meet their individual need
- poor relationships with case managers
- frequent changes of case manager
- their identified needs not being addressed
- a lack of genuine involvement with their case manager in planning for work to reduce reoffending
- objectives in plans not being personalised to their assessed needs.

The inspection of current cases found:

- some good work being undertaken to support and promote desistance
- work to build and sustain effective working relationships with children and young people was generally done well
- a majority of children and young people were supported to negotiate structural barriers
- self-assessment tools, such as the Youth Justice Board's 'What Do You Think', were completed in a majority of cases, but the views of children and young people were reflected in less than one in four plans
- although learning styles questionnaires were completed in almost three in ten cases in the sample, they were explicitly referenced in plans or utilised in interventions in only one in four of those cases
- there had been problems with compliance in a number of cases but barriers to engagement had only been assessed clearly in a minority of cases. There was no evidence that children and young people had signed their intervention plans in almost one in four cases
- intervention plans to address identified barriers to engagement and re-engagement were in place in only one in three relevant cases
- many of those children and young people who had received a number of court orders over time were subject to the same or similar interventions, and found them no longer age-appropriate, or disengaging, or repetitive or demotivating.

In interviews with case managers we found:

- a lack of detailed knowledge around desistance theory in general and its application to practice, not helped by the fact that the majority of case managers had received little training on this subject
- evidence that case managers often equated desistance with a narrow offence focus or risk-factor approach to practice
- case managers sometimes felt pressure from their managers to concentrate on delivering offence focused interventions which they could evidence rather than focus on building relationships with service users.



# Recommendations

## **Youth Offending Team managers should ensure that:**

1. planning for engagement and re-engagement with children, young people and their parents/carers is explicit and central to the supervisory process; assessed family work needs are delivered and work to assess, address and manage peer influences is properly carried out (desistance domain 2)
2. the diversity needs of all children and young people are fully and actively assessed and there are practical strategies in place to support positive outcomes (desistance domain 3)
3. opportunities are developed for children and young people to participate in community activities to motivate them to take a greater role in their neighbourhood (desistance domain 5)
4. the views of children and young people and their parents/carers are actively sought and included in assessments, plans and reviews; intervention plans are signed systematically; children and young people are taught problem solving solutions that they can individually put into practice; all interventions start from the child or young person's strengths and motivational interviewing techniques are embedded into practice (desistance domain 6)
5. practical support is given in a timely manner to children and young people and praise, reward and celebration of achievement is integrated into the supervisory journey (desistance domain 7)
6. restorative activities are outcome focused; interventions are personalised to the needs of children and young people and interventions are age-appropriate (desistance domain 8)
7. training in desistance theory is provided to all staff that need this, and its application evaluated.

*We are aware of work carried out by the YJB and Youth Offending Services in the period between fieldwork and publication of this report and that the AssetPlus framework can help Youth Offending Team managers achieve the recommendations listed above.*

## **The Youth Justice Board should:**

8. following implementation of AssetPlus, undertake an assessment of the knowledge of desistance theory among practitioners and use the outcomes of this to revise their training strategy and the training materials available for use. We note, and welcome, the use of the Post Implementation Reviews where there is a specific question asking staff about their knowledge of desistance following their AssetPlus training
9. review YOT practice guidance to take greater account of desistance theory; including measures to promote genuinely collaborative working with children and young people, and working with key personal, social and community networks.

# Desistance and young people: the research context

# 1

# 1.Desistance and young people: the research context

## Introduction

This chapter summarises the desistance research both in general terms and in respect of children and young people. It then outlines the background to this inspection, its scope and methodology. At the heart of the inspection were interviews with former and current service users. These allowed inspectors to gather and analyse both retrospective and contemporary accounts of children and young people's experiences of YOT services.

## Summary

- Although desistance theory has influenced practice in the adult sector there is, by comparison, relatively little dedicated research on desistance and children and young people.
- Consequently there is no generalised agreement as to what constitutes 'best desistance practice' for children and young people. The research reflects different emphases in what is considered effective in supporting children and young people to desist.
- The voice of service users was central to this inspection methodology. The views of both former service users who had not offended for over 12 months and those of current service users and their parents/carers were sought.

- 1.1. There is no single, unified definition or understanding of desistance as applicable to children and young people or what the key change mechanisms are. Over time, desistance theories have presented various hypotheses, leading to diverse approaches that in turn emphasise different factors. These have included:
  - maturation (Rutherford, 1985)
  - rational choice and volition (Clarke and Cornish, 1985)
  - development of social bonds (Sampson and Laub, 2001)
  - self-identity (Maruna, 2001)
  - cognitive transformation (Giordano *et al.*, 2002).
- 1.2. Research also makes a distinction between **primary** and **secondary** desistance. The former refers to the immediate cessation of criminal activity in the immediate or short term. The latter describes the longer term move away from criminal lifestyles and offending which might be measured over several years, or even decades.
- 1.3. Given that this inspection specifically examined work with children and young people, primary desistance was the main focus. A number of former service users interviewed, however, had not reoffended for some considerable time (nearly four years in one case).
- 1.4. Although there may be no 'unified theory' of desistance there is some unity of thought in characterising desistance as a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a specific event. There is an increasing consensus that it involves a complex interweaving of individual, familial, social and environmental factors. Canton (2012) believed that desistance was not something that could be pursued as a direct objective, but something that was achieved in the course of living a certain kind of lifestyle.
- 1.5. Desistance theory is not simply, or even primarily, a matter of an individual stopping offending, or the delivery of evidence-based interventions. This is not to say that desistance and these perspectives are not compatible. Desistance approaches have a broader scope, ones that encompass

a diverse series of 'forces and influences' which underpin change rather than targeted modes to achieve change.

- 1.6. A rounded model of desistance practice should take account of the wider social context of children and young people's behaviour. It should acknowledge the fundamental importance of trusting professional relationships as a medium for change. It should include individual empowerment and enhanced social inclusion as legitimate objectives as well as reduced reoffending.
- 1.7. Dedicated research interest in children and young people and desistance is increasing (Barry, 2009, 2010; Gray, 2013). The majority of published work, however, has centred on adult offenders. This means there is a relative lack of established literature specifically on children and young people's pathways away from offending.

## **Young people and desistance**

- 1.8. Theories of desistance have variously placed emphasis on maturation, development of social bonds, rational choice, and cognitive transformation. In considering children and young people and desistance, it may seem natural to look towards maturational theories as a starting point. The fact that offending behaviour tends to increase during early adolescence, peaks in late adolescence and eventually declines in early adulthood is well established. This link between age and crime has been described by Moffitt (1993) as the most robust and least understood empirical observation in the field of criminology.
- 1.9. Barry (2009, 2010) has conducted extensive qualitative research with children and young people who have offended. She suggests that for those who persist in offending lifestyles the key maintenance factors are access to the money and drugs offending brings; not having a secure place to live; influence of peers; use of alcohol and the burden of having a criminal record which limits future opportunities.
- 1.10. Barry emphasises the importance of underpinning, structural factors; substance misuse, poverty, homelessness/dislocation and a criminal record. An individual child or young person is unlikely to be able to overcome these difficulties solely through their own efforts. Barry remains critical of approaches which suggest that routes out of offending are primarily a matter of individual change. She suggests that desistance research is divided between on the one hand, structural change which supports desistance, and subjective change which is viewed as the forerunner to structural change.
- 1.11. One implication of Barry's research is that interventions to promote reduced offending via individual change deal with, at best, only half the problem. Children and young people must also be supported in helping them achieve more in life and to stop fearing that they will fail. In short, the social situations in which children and young people live and function also need to be a focus of work and practitioners should actively engage in removing structural constraints for the child and young person. This does not mean ignoring individual responsibility for past offending. This needs to be done, however, in ways which do not damage their sense of selves as children and young people who can have an alternative future.
- 1.12. It is here that the importance of a child or young person's self-identity and of their narrative accounts can be seen. Maruna (2001) highlighted the role that self-identity plays in desistance, arguing that to successfully desist, offenders needed to develop a pro-social identity for themselves. His studies showed that those who successfully desisted managed to come to terms with their past, even learning valuable lessons from their offending and punishments, while taking control of their lives in the present and having a clear sense of purpose and meaning.
- 1.13. Gray's (2013) research examined how YOTs and partner agencies might strengthen work to address children and young people's wider social needs, as Barry suggests they should, in order to support desistance from crime. Gray accepts the research evidence which shows that decisions to cease

offending are an end product of a process of transformation of attitudes and ways of thinking, accompanied by positive changes in their social circumstances.

- 1.14. Echoing Barry, Gray also notes that children and young people's choices and success in negotiating the risks associated with future offending are often severely limited by social constraints which they lack the skills, power or influence to overcome themselves. This is a role which YOTs are well placed to support children and young people with, but which, Gray (citing previous HMI Probation inspection reports), suggests they do not always do well.
- 1.15. Gray argues that a Youth Justice Board target-driven culture of youth justice has led YOTs to place greater emphasis on challenging an individual's attitudes, behaviour, and responsibility for offending (as in Barry's critique), with less focus on meeting complex social and welfare needs. Any adequate analysis of desistance practice with children and young people will also need to take account of measures which offer personalised interventions to each individual to remove structural barriers, promote individual change, develop skills to maximise opportunities and help to sustain them on the often difficult journey towards a new understanding of self and leading a crime free lifestyle.

### **Applying desistance to work with children and young people: the practice spine**

- 1.16. There are considerable challenges to establishing a credible framework and set of criteria against which positive desistance practice might be assessed. McNeill and Weaver (2010) observe that while desistance theory and research is rich in analysis of the forces and influences that can underpin offender change, it regrettably lacks any sort of practice framework.
- 1.17. Nonetheless, while researchers have largely been cautious of specifying some sort of desistance practice manual, their work does provide some solid foundations for approaches to practice which are likely to support or promote desistance with children and young people.
- 1.18. These overlap the eight desistance domains and are summarised here in what, to use McNeill and Weaver's (2010) phrase, may be termed a 'practice spine'. This spine does not advocate specific ways of working, programmes or a distinct set of interventions, but may be seen for the purposes of this inspection as an orientation or approach to working with children and young people. It does, however, incorporate some of the wider structural dimensions advocated by Barry (2010) and Gray (2013). Its most important elements include:
  - building positive relationships with children and young people; engagement, a listening ear, motivation and encouragement
  - realism; desistance is a process, a journey and lapses/relapses are to be expected. How these are dealt with is, therefore, critical
  - recognising that language is important; labelling children and young people (for example. as 'young offenders') can confirm offending identities
  - using custody sparingly; custody seriously limits future life chances and opportunities
  - personalisation; the process or desistance will be different from young person to young person – one size does not fit all
  - recognition of the significance of social contexts and the need to work with them; family, school, peers, community and work
  - promoting redemption; recognising and rewarding attempts to give up crime; encouraging and confirming positive change; using restorative approaches
  - creating opportunities for change and integration; the experience of being a part of (adult) society; rewarding constructive activities.

## Methodology

- 1.19. The future behaviour (whether offending or desistance) of individual children or young people is not unequivocally predictable, and with the lack of consensus about desistance and what constitutes effective practice, the range of inspection methodologies likely to work sufficiently well is limited.
- 1.20. Desistance research with children and young people has generally been qualitatively based and retrospective. That is, children and young people who have/have not reoffended (so-called persisters and desisters) have been interviewed and their responses analysed to identify what, in their opinion, have been the most significant factors/events which have either helped them out of an offending lifestyle, or conversely, have led them to continue. We adopted the same approach in this inspection - interviews were held with former service users who had not reoffended (either as children or young people, or into adulthood) for a period of at least 12 months – but in addition, our methodology included the inspection of the case records.
- 1.21. This approach held a number of benefits. It had a genuine 'outcome' focus, as the desisters group had attained the desired goal of not reoffending. Secondly, interviews with the 'desisters' allowed us to explore what in the children and young people's experience had been the most important and effective aspects of YOT supervision for them, and for the persister group, what had prevented progress in their efforts to desist. Lastly, these responses allowed us to develop informed lines of enquiry in respect of current cases and current YOT practice.
- 1.22. In summary, the inspection methodology comprised:
1. the identification of two groups of children and young people:
    - (a) A group of former service users who had been subject to youth rehabilitation orders (YROs) or custody who had not reoffended for at least 12 months after their orders had ended (corresponding to 'desisters' in the research literature).
    - (b) A group of current service users subject to referral orders, YROs or custody who had reoffended within 12 months of their order being made/being released from custody (corresponding to 'persisters').
  2. semi-structured interviews were held with both groups of children and young people to ascertain, from their perspective, the key events, interventions or other factors which had most significantly helped or hindered their attempts not to reoffend
  3. meetings with the parents/carers of many of the children or young people who were current service users were also held
  4. interviews with case managers and other professionals involved in current cases
  5. an inspection of case files and other relevant documentation.
- 1.23. The fieldwork took place between January and April 2015. Six YOTs were chosen in order to make sure we had a reasonable geographical spread and a mix of urban and rural YOTS across England and Wales:
- Darlington
  - Leicester City
  - Camden
  - Cwm Taf
  - Somerset
  - East Sussex

- 1.24. Across these 6 YOTs, inspectors met with 16 former service users. A total of 37 current service user cases were inspected with face-to-face meetings with 34 children and young people. We also interviewed 21 parents/carers and 2 key workers from children's homes.
- 1.25. Of course, these respondents may not be representative of all those who met our criteria for inclusion in the inspection. In addition, the methodology does not allow for analysis of quantitative outcomes, or suggest specific approaches and factors as being the most effective in supporting children and young people desisting from further offending.

# The experience of former YOT service users - desisters

# 2



## 2.The experience of former YOT service users - desisters

### Introduction

This chapter presents findings from the first part of the inspection. This phase primarily involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 16 former YOT service users. Inspectors also had access to historic case records. The children and young people interviewed had not offended for a minimum period of 12 months following the end of their last court order and were therefore characterised as 'desisters'.

These interviewees provided detailed, reflective narratives of their experiences of YOT supervision and described what had had the most (and least) impact in helping them move away from offending.

### Summary

- Former service users consistently identified having a trusting, open, and collaborative working relationship with a YOT member of staff or one professional outside the YOT as the most important factor in helping them move away from offending.
- Family support and parenthood was cited as key to changing their lifestyle.
- Practical help and support was generally valued over formal YOT intervention programmes. Children and young people having their aspirations treated seriously was also central to them achieving lasting change.
- Changing negative peers had been crucial in remaining crime free. In most instances this had come about as a result of other lifestyle changes rather than any work done with/by the YOT.
- While formal programmes were cited as being less important, their positive impact was associated with:
  - (i) interventions which equipped them with problem solving solutions to deal with issues (for example, anger or stress management)
  - (ii) interventions which changed their victim perspective (such as, restorative interventions).

### Factors supporting desistance

- 2.1. Former service users were generally positive about their experiences with the YOT. Many had remained in contact with the YOT post-statutory supervision and had retained positive relationships with staff.
- 2.2. In general, the analysis of these children and young peoples' responses reflected many of the findings found in the academic research. The most consistent theme to emerge from the analysis of their responses was the importance of a positive, trusting working relationship with at least one member of staff. Interestingly, in many instances this was not necessarily their direct supervisor or case manager, but included YOT nurses, substance misuse workers, employment advisers, mentors, advocates and others.

### Quotes from former service users

*"The most important thing my worker did was to listen and ask me what I liked to do and what I wanted to do with my life. She didn't judge me even though I'd done some pretty bad things. She took me seriously – when I said I wanted to get into boxing she helped me do it. When I was looking for work, she helped me find work."* (Camden YOS)

*"My case manager saved me. Without him I'd be dead. He listened and gave me hope. The work I did with the YOS was mostly a waste of time but the relationship I had with my case manager made me feel wanted and that I could change if I wanted to."* (Leicester City YOT)

*"She [the case manager] respected me, talked **to** me, not **down** to me. I could trust her and talk about anything. I shared a lot with her, stuff I'd been bottling up inside. I never used to talk. I always lied about everything. She helped me change."* (East Sussex YOT)

- 2.3. These quotes illustrate the central importance of a non-judgemental, trusting professional relationship in which children and young people were listened to. They had their goals and aspirations taken seriously, acted upon, and case managers instilled a sense of hope and self-efficacy.
- 2.4. A number of children and young people spoke about not wanting to let their YOT workers down and several had remained in contact with services months or even years after their statutory supervision had ended. This served as testament of the quality and meaningfulness of the relationships which had been established.
- 2.5. The second major theme to emerge from the analysis of former service users' interviews was their views around establishing (or re-establishing) important family and personal relationships. Several had become parents themselves and reported that there had been an accompanying major change in how they now saw themselves and their life's priorities. One former service user said that he did not want his son to have a criminal for a father.
- 2.6. In this regard, former service users spoke positively about the help they had received from YOTs in building or rebuilding fractured relationships with significant others, frequently parents/carers.

### Quote from a former service user

*"I had been arguing a lot with my family because I kept getting into trouble. My case manager was brilliant. She was thoughtful, kind, supportive and gave good advice. She also did some mediation work. This helped us to bond as a family."* (East Sussex YOT)

- 2.7. Most of those interviewed attributed the influence of peers as a significant factor in their former offending and stressed the importance of having changed these friendship groups, enabling them to achieve and maintain a crime free lifestyle. Few, however, reported that the YOT had completed any work with them specifically around peer influence. Where such work had been completed it had focused on helping them as individuals to resist pressure from others. This was viewed as largely ineffective and irrelevant.
- 2.8. In most instances the development of new friendships had largely come about by virtue of other significant changes in their lives. For example, making new friends through school, college, and employment, or involvement in constructive activities. Others reported important lifestyle changes and events as having loosened ties with negative peers. Improved family relationships resulting in more time spent at home, parenthood, or becoming drug-free typified these responses.

- 2.9. About half of those interviewed were able to cite specific programmes which they felt had directly helped them change their behaviour. Specifically, these included anger management programmes, interventions which helped them deal with stressful situations and some substance misuse work.
- 2.10. Two key themes emerged from responses about the interventions which the YOT had delivered. Firstly, the importance of ensuring that interventions were based on a genuinely collaborative approach which in turn promoted effective engagement by providing children and young people with an input into, and ownership of, shared goals and objectives. Secondly, a common feature of these interventions was their relevance to the assessed needs of the case. In some instances, former service users were able to implement problem solving solutions which they had learned and developed through these interventions.

### Examples of notable practice

Hayes had successfully completed a YRO which he had received for an offence of robbery. There was clear evidence of meaningful dialogue with him about what he thought were the reasons behind his offending. Information from the self-assessment questionnaire had properly been integrated into the plan. The views of his mother had also been considered. The concerns that Hayes shared about the impact of his behaviour on his victims and on his own family had taken a central place in the objectives that had been agreed. These were fully relevant and were informed by the assessed needs in the case. (Cwm Taf YOT)

Millie had received a YRO for assaulting a friend while being heavily under the influence of alcohol. When asked about what had been most helpful to her remaining out of trouble she spoke about work to help her 'de-stress'. She was able to describe the techniques she had learned and still used to help her remain calm – removing herself from confrontational situations, taking time out and imagining positive or restful images. (Leicester City YOT)

- 2.11. The practical support provided by the YOT was also reported by the children and young people as being an important factor in their move away from offending. This took differing forms but children and young people cited help in accessing employment, entry into positive leisure activities or providing opportunities to engage in voluntary work as examples of support which had helped them change their lives for the better.

#### Quotes from former service users

*"I like to be kept busy. The YOT supported me to use the computer to look for jobs and sign up to agencies. They helped me with interview techniques and preparing what to say. It was very much on the practical side."* (Somerset YOT)

*"My experience of being with the YOT gave me the desire and ambition to build a career in youth work. I received support from the YOT education staff about how to go about this. They helped me to do some voluntary work with a local youth club. This helped me to get into college and train."* (Cwm Taf YOT)

*"I was always getting into trouble because I got bored. My worker talked to me about joining a youth club. This was close to where I was living but I didn't know about it. After going the first time I went all the time and this helped me to stay out of trouble. I've met different people, made new friends and there's loads to do."* (East Sussex YOT)

2.12. Restorative justice approaches, reparation and victim work acted as both a beneficial lever for change and, in a small number of cases, a barrier. Those young people who found reparation helpful reported the following benefits:

- being introduced to the adult world of work
- their acceptance and non-judgemental reception by those providing or overseeing placements
- providing experiences and 'tasters' of things they wanted to pursue in the future
- providing a sense of 'giving back' or contributing to their communities
- a more general increase in self-esteem and self-worth.

### **Examples of notable practice**

Following extensive discussions with Jackie the YOT decided to change the reparation placement from painting a garage to a placement in a charity shop. This was the correct decision as it introduced her to the adult world of work and led to a number of positive outcomes being achieved. Jackie was considered to be a hard worker by the supervisor who was willing to provide a character reference. Jackie spoke fondly of her time at the shop and said how much she had appreciated being valued and affirmed for her efforts. She felt she was treated as an adult and no staff member spoke to her in a critical way. The YOT was able to build on the achievements from this placement. (Darlington YOT)

The YOT had been working with Ollie who was unmotivated. His appointment keeping was beginning to deteriorate and he showed little motivation to engage with any work. The case manager decided to pause the work that had been planned and to spend time with Ollie to better understand what was going on in his life. Over a number of sessions Ollie reported a range of complex issues which were hindering his motivation. These ranged from poor family relationships, self-harm and feelings of being overwhelmed by the sentence of the court. The case manager sensitively engaged with Ollie at his pace. Through this process a programme of work involving reparation, victim empathy and healthy relationships was determined. The agreed tasks were driven by Ollie. He later reported that his self-worth had increased and he was able to see the direct link between his offending and the reparation work he had been required to perform. (East Sussex YOT)

### **Barriers to desistance**

- 2.13. As noted previously, several former service users had maintained contact with YOT staff for some time after their statutory supervision had ended. They were, however, also ready and able to provide more critical insights into aspects of their supervision.
- 2.14. A number of children and young people perceived some YOT staff as not being genuinely committed, overly authoritarian and not actively listening to their needs. They reported that this had undermined the establishment or building of trust. A small number complained about the jargon in plans and interventions as well as a lack of awareness or understanding about the content of plans.
- 2.15. Formal offending behaviour sessions were felt by some of the children and young people to have been barriers, describing them as tedious, boring, and unengaging. It was clear that several had simply drifted through sessions, complying but not actively participating. Several children and young people mentioned that YOT interventions had had little or no direct impact on supporting them to turn away from offending.

### Quotes from former service users

*"...sitting around in a group watching a video on knife crime. It was totally, y'know – just dead man."*

*"I went to most of the courses but they were s\*\*t. We was lectured at and told what would happen if we kept offending. If I had not got on with my worker I wouldn't have gone. When you're in a group you're showing off to your mates. It's just a game."*

*"The victim workshop was crap. A waste of time. I couldn't even understand half the words they were using. The YOT just make you go on these courses to show that you've done victim work. Then they say well done, you nod, smile and move on. I was just playing with them."*

- 2.16. In other cases, important work with family networks had not been completed. In one instance, a young person who was living independently still expressed a strong desire to rebuild a relationship with his estranged mother. This was evidently an important priority for him, one which not only had the potential to build self-esteem, but also could have led to longer term sustainable support going beyond the term of YOT supervision.
- 2.17. Several of the former service users had been Looked After Children. A majority of these reported their experiences negatively. The most disruptive factor cited was having multiple placements, the consequent lack of stability and frequent changes of social worker which inhibited the development of consistent relationships.
- 2.18. Several other barriers were described by former service users. One highlighted her struggles to comply with what she experienced as an over-demanding Intensive Supervision Programme timetable. This eventually led to non-compliance and a return to court. The young person complained that she had spoken to her case manager about the difficulties she was having, but nothing changed.
- 2.19. Another noted he had experienced a lot of inconsistency when first under YOT supervision in terms of reliability. He said that his first case manager was often not there when he attended for appointments and at one stage there were several changes of supervisor in a short period. This led to problems with compliance and engagement which ultimately led to breach proceedings. Matters only improved when the last case manager took on his case.
- 2.20. Others spoke of how their experience of the criminal justice system had left them feeling labelled as an offender. One recalled being described in court as "...a young alcoholic" while another expressed feeling embarrassed and humiliated at being publicly identified as an offender while undertaking unpaid work.
- 2.21. The common theme running through all of the barriers identified above (lack of genuine collaborative working, use of alienating language, children and young people enduring interventions from which they are deriving little or no benefit, omitting important interventions, not reviewing capacity for an intensive programme, or inconsistency in approach) is that they reflect a lack of a fully personalised approach being taken in the work with the individual.

### Quotes from former service users

*"I really wanted to see my mum again. I know she has been a bad mother but she's still my mum. The YOT said it would be difficult for me to see her. I couldn't understand why. I miss her."*

*"It's really hard to build trust with your social worker when they change all the time. How would you feel if you had to keep telling your story time and time again? It's not fair."*

*"The programme was too general. It didn't really relate to me. Yes I needed help with my drugs but the course could have been for anyone. It was more like a class where you learn stuff. It wasn't personal to me."*

### Summary

- 2.22. The responses of former service users were consistent with many of the headline findings from the academic desistance research, including the central importance of professional and personal relationships, the need to engage with wider networks and promoting diversity by ensuring a personalised and individual plan of work with each child or young person. Equally important was addressing structural barriers, creating opportunities for positive activities and community reintegration, keeping children and young people motivated and use of reparation and restorative approaches.
- 2.23. Clearly, these children and young people's experiences of their YOT and the youth justice system varied widely. Many had gone through similar types of interventions, but reported quite differing experiences of them. It is evident then that it is not a simple matter of what work is carried out, but also how children and young people are listened to, treated, engaged and involved. In addition, interventions that are personalised well are likely to be most effective.

# The experience of current service users - persisters

3

## 3.The experience of current service users - persisters

### Introduction

This section describes the findings from a detailed examination of 37 cases drawn from participating YOTs' existing caseloads. The main criterion for selection was that each child or young person should have had at least two previous disposals and had not yet definitively desisted from offending. Inspectors held interviews with these children and young people, some of their parents/carers, and case managers. They also had access to case records and other documentation. These different sources of evidence were brought together in reflective case summaries. The analyses of these summaries formed the basis of judgements about practice across the eight desistance domains.

### Summary

- Inspectors found that work to build and sustain positive working relationships between practitioners and service users was done well.
- There was also evidence that a majority of children and young people were being supported to address some key structural barriers and challenges.
- Planning for engagement and re-engagement was limited.
- Views of service users and information from the learning styles questionnaires they had completed were not properly integrated into plans.
- Work to build family support was absent in the vast majority of cases.
- Work on identity was consistently absent.
- Overall, we found a mixed picture in performance across the eight desistance domains indicating clear scope for improvement across all areas of practice examined.

3.1. It should be noted that the eight desistance domains are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Success in addressing a key structural barrier, for example, by securing employment may lead to improvements in self-worth, a positive identity, and integration within the community. In making judgements under each heading we have drawn on and evaluated documentary and case record evidence, the views of service users and (in some cases) parents/carers, case managers and other professionals.

### Building relationships and engagement

- 3.2. Both desistance research and the responses from our desisters highlight the importance of positive professional relationships as the bedrock of practice, engagement, re-engagement and collaborative working. Given its important place in desistance research, we looked for evidence in this area.
- 3.3. We found much good work and creativity shown by YOT workers in building positive relationships with children and young people. In the vast majority of cases, workers were trying hard to build trust and engage children and young people through positive activities, addressing diversity needs, showing flexibility in supervision arrangements, or allowing other professionals to take a lead where a positive working relationship had already been established. It was also clear that in many instances workers were showing real commitment, 'going the extra mile' to support those whom they were supervising.



### Quotes from current service users

*"The case manager encourages me, supports me and would do anything for me. I know I can call on her and she'll be there for me – I trust her completely. She has helped me find a course, sorted out a worker to help me with my drug taking and got me to think about my crimes."* (Cwm Taf YOT)

*"My worker is someone I trust totally, I can tell her anything and I know that she will listen, she has done so much for me."* (Darlington YOT)

*"We talk about every single thing. I can talk to my case manager about anything. The best thing about her though is that she makes me feel sort of comfortable. Like, it wasn't like I had to be there. I actually enjoy learning with her."*

### Examples of notable practice: building positive relationships

The case manager had a realistic appraisal of her professional relationship with the young person and acknowledged that there was still a level of mistrust. Importantly, even though she had known the young person for some time, she saw building rapport as something they continually had to work on. (Leicester City YOT)

The case manager recognised that Anita really did not want to come to the YOT. They were both aware, however, that Anita had a good relationship with the YOT nurse. As a result, the case manager tried to facilitate as much of the work as possible through her. This included work to address sexual health which was a clear vulnerability concern. The outcome was that Anita was able to be more open with the case manager. (Darlington YOT)

- 3.4. Inspectors also found examples of practice which clearly undermined the development of purposeful relationships and any prospect of effective work. Regrettably, (albeit in a very limited number of cases) pejorative and negative labels had been attached to children and young people, who were characterised as being *"unlikeable"*, *"a strange individual"* or even *"feral"*. It was not surprising to find that in those cases engagement and compliance was poor.
- 3.5. We discovered in a few cases a tendency to deal with 16 and 17 year olds more as adults than children. The emphasis in these cases was on providing consistent messages about compliance, the individual child or young person's supervision requirements, and their responsibility to keep appointments. One inspector characterised the relationship in such cases as *"functional"*.
- 3.6. It was notable that, even in cases where we found positive working relationships had been established, assessment and planning **for** engagement simply did not feature. It may be that this aspect of work with children and young people was regarded as either too obvious or basic to include in formal assessments or planning. The failure to collate and analyse previous knowledge of what had/had not been successful in engaging the child or young person, or to understand what the barriers to engagement had been, were important shortcomings. This was particularly true for those cases where there had been previous compliance or enforcement concerns.
- 3.7. There were several examples of positive collaborative working. In particular there was extensive use of self-assessments, including the 'What Do You Think' (WDYT), and learning styles questionnaires. The inspection revealed that some form of self-assessment had been completed in approximately four-fifths of the cases examined. In the best examples, we saw that these documents had been clearly referenced, followed through and evidenced in assessments, intervention plans and the delivery of work with children and young people.

## Examples of notable practice: joint/collaborative working

There was a properly detailed initial intervention plan, based on the assessment of Jasmine's learning style as 'visual'. The plan contained a number of pictograms relevant to the agreed targets. Jasmine was clear about what the main elements of her plan were, specifically anger management, counselling, constructive activities and education. (Camden YOS)

A screening tool had been completed by Bhavik to help identify issues which were most important to him. These were incorporated into the initial intervention plan. Bhavik had a strong grasp of the work which was being undertaken and was able to explain the different roles of the workers who were supporting him. This was impressive given that there were four workers working with him to address a range of different issues. (Cwm Taf YOT)

- 3.8. When we looked for evidence to see how far the views of service users (WDYT) contained in these assessments had been used to inform core Assets, plans and interventions, we found that this had occurred in approximately one-quarter of the 37 cases. It was a similar picture with the information from the learning styles questionnaires. Here we found that only seven cases contained reference to how this information would shape the way in which interventions were delivered. Furthermore, only nine children and young people had signed their intervention plans.
- 3.9. Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that opportunities for actively involving children and young people, working with them in a genuinely collaborative fashion, and incorporating issues of real concern to them were being missed. It may also go some way to explaining that in our meetings the majority of children and young people could not recall actions contained in their intervention plans.

### Quotes from current service users

*"I'm not very good at reading and writing. I couldn't understand the letters I got. I often missed appointments but it really wasn't my fault. I told them I was rubbish at remembering."*

*"I don't remember signing anything. I know they said I had to go and see someone about my weed. It was like they were telling me what I had to do and who I had to see. I said I was no good at talking but they made me. That didn't help and I ended up in court for breach because I couldn't concentrate for the whole session."*

*"When I started with the YOT they just told me what I would be doing. I had no choice and I didn't get what I was being asked to do. I knew that I had offended and it was a punishment, but it would have been respectful if they had asked me for my thoughts."*

*"I think they put things down in a plan – I saw something which was typed up on the computer and I had to sign. Couldn't say what was in it!"*

- 3.10. Interviews with case managers raised another potential disincentive. A number of responses gave clear indications that practitioners sometimes felt the pressure to meet key performance targets and the need to deliver offending behaviour interventions at the expense of maximising good engagement. There was an acknowledgement that engagement was often superficial but the end goal was in the completion of a programme rather than its impact on supporting desistance.
- 3.11. We found that there had been some difficulties in compliance in almost three-quarters of the cases of the current service users. Overall, the assessment, analysis and plans to address

non-compliance were not well evidenced in case records and other documentation. The YOTs made use of compliance panels or similar forums to consider and review such cases but the emphasis appeared to be on what may be described as defensible decision making – whether enforcement measures should proceed or be held over. Concrete remedial action was less evident. This was not good enough.

### **Working with service users' networks**

- 3.12. Desistance literature strongly indicates the significance of children and young people's social bonds and wider networks. We explored how YOTs were supporting their development. We looked particularly at family and peer relationships, and at significant networks including school, college and work settings.
- 3.13. We found evidence that work with the child or young person's family networks had been done well in three-fifths of current cases. The analysis of the case summaries suggested that a distinction could be drawn between two different types of family work:
- work done with parents/carers to develop or improve parenting styles/skills
  - more general forms of support, such as giving advice, accessibility of case managers in crisis situations, dealing with questions and queries, mobilising other provision or help, and keeping them informed.
- 3.14. In respect of direct work to improve parenting skills, most interventions were delivered through dedicated schemes such as Family Intervention Projects, Multi-Systemic Therapy or Functional Family Therapy services.

### **Examples of notable practice: working with parents/carers**

The case manager had considered Farooq's mother as being critical in supporting a change in behaviour. There was evidence of joint work with children's social care around improving Farooq's relationship with his mother and other siblings. Improvement in their relationship was evident in separate accounts provided by Farooq and his mother. (Camden YOS)

There was good ongoing work to repair Becky's relationship with her mother which was clearly important to both, but could also be highly fractious. Rebuilding the relationship to a situation in which Becky is now living independently meant that some of the potentially negative aspects were now less frequent, protracted and damaging. (Leicester City YOT)

- 3.15. As far as more general support was concerned, parents/carers were largely positive although a few indicated that they had wanted to be more involved, and felt that they could have contributed more to the work done with their child. This type of work had been carried out well in just over half of the current cases. In addition, we believed that there was scope for some type of formal or informal dedicated family support in virtually all the cases inspected.

### Quotes from parents/carers

*"I feel supported by the YOT and the case manager in particular. I know I can call on him anytime and he'll get back to me. I speak to the case manager regularly and he keeps me informed on all that's going on."* (Darlington YOT)

*"The case manager hardly contacted me. Over the course of 12 months I was only invited to one meeting and that was for the preparation of the pre-sentence report. I did not feel involved with the YOT at all."*

*"I would not have got through without the help of the YOT. All the staff have been amazing. They have kept me informed of everything with my son. I am so grateful. I know that they are only a phone call away – they never let me down."* (Cwm Taf YOT)

*"I have been out of the loop. I wish I was more involved in what my son is doing at the YOT. He's my son and I know him. They hardly ask me what I think. He's only 12. For crying out loud he's a baby. I could tell them loads. They didn't keep me informed – just wrote to me when things were going wrong. The YOT did not have a good word to say about my son. They didn't praise him when he was good and have not given him proper and clear boundaries."*

- 3.16. We found occasional evidence of effective work with wider networks. This was mostly in schools, colleges children and young people's residential placements. On the whole these examples were the exception rather than the rule. Where they did take place they had had a demonstrable impact through either heading off potentially unhelpful actions (such as the threat of exclusion), demonstrating pro-social modelling or simply promoting positive joint working.

### Examples of notable practice: engaging with wider networks

This was a complex case in which there had been historical issues with poor school attendance. The case manager regularly liaised with the school in order to ease Gordon's transition to a new placement. The education department had been considering prosecuting Gordon's mother for his poor school attendance but by promoting the link with the YOT education worker, the case manager had managed to stop this from going ahead. This brought great relief to Gordon's mother because she had been struggling with his lack of motivation to attend school. She felt that the YOT had responded to an issue that was relevant for her and her son. (Leicester City YOT)

Josiah had developed a positive relationship with the two carers at his supported living accommodation. They had enabled him to develop his independent living skills. The interview with one of the carers provided a very positive view of the progress she had seen. She was (initially) quite concerned because he would not initiate a conversation, appeared in low mood and would stay in his bedroom. Now he was eating with them, cooking, and undertaking chores. His mood had lifted and staff at the placement were often able to share a joke with him. There had been some difficult incidents to deal with for which Josiah had apologised. The carers had provided stability and shown how relationships could work, something Josiah had not experienced before. (Somerset YOT)

- 3.17. Negative peer influence was identified as an important factor associated with a child or young person's offending in more than one-third of the 37 cases of current service users. This was seen by former service users as a significant factor influencing both their offending and routes out of offending.

- 3.18. Many practitioners found it difficult to address negative peer relationships. The development of strong friendships/associations is common for teenagers and the prospect of somehow diverting children and young people away from peer groups was challenging. As a result perhaps, peer work was not always prioritised and did not feature prominently in the cases inspected.
- 3.19. Generally the approach taken was one which focused on how the child or young person could themselves develop strategies to resist the negative influence of others. Examples included work to try and develop assertiveness, consequential thinking and encouraging children and young people to walk away from situations.
- 3.20. There was little evidence of analysing the influence of peers in a broader context. For example, considering in detail friendship groups or what might be done to encourage those with pro-social peers. Furthermore, little attention had been paid to the development of new friendships through involvement in constructive activities.
- 3.21. We concluded that overall, effective work with children and young people's key networks had been delivered well in only two of the inspected cases.

### **Addressing structural barriers**

- 3.22. We described earlier the importance of how well children and young people are supported and empowered to address a range of structural issues and barriers which they are not necessarily able to tackle solely through their own efforts.
- 3.23. We found examples of good practice where YOTs had supported children and young people to negotiate, manage and often overcome a wide range of structural barriers. Children and young people had been supported in dealing with obstacles and experiences which had affected their ability to participate in education and employment, or helped with their substance misuse, or health and accommodation needs.

#### **Example of notable practice: addressing structural barriers**

The case manager and social worker had supported Cherry to secure a place on a care leaver's course in childcare. Cherry confirmed that this was her main ambition and was enthused by the prospect. Her criminal record had been an obvious obstacle but workers had not been deterred and had supported her in negotiating this barrier. They had spent time with her exploring how she could make the mistakes she had made in her life work for her by stressing what she had learnt to the college. (Leicester City YOT)

- 3.24. Conversely, there were also examples of insufficient support. A lack of response from other agencies and organisations had not been followed up by case managers. Children and young people reported a frustration by this lack of engagement and felt helpless in knowing how their personal situations could ever change. On occasions, case managers themselves said they were left powerless. This was disappointing for we saw little evidence of real attempts being made to overcome some of these barriers.
- 3.25. To illustrate this point, in one case it was well documented that a young person's mother was going to be prosecuted because of her son's non-attendance at school, yet the fundamental reasons for the poor attendance were not fully understood by the YOT. No attempts had been made to formally meet with the school. In another case, a young person was placed in a pupil referral unit due to his disruptive behaviour. While there, he told his case manager that being in a class of 25 disruptive boys was not helping his behaviour to improve. His opinion was not heard or acted upon and he stopped attending school altogether.

## Creating opportunities and community integration

- 3.26. We looked at work which had been done to support service users in participating as active members of their communities and to engage in or experience constructive or rewarding activities. From a desistance perspective these are important elements as they enhance an individuals' quality of life and thereby contribute to their paths away from offending.
- 3.27. This was the domain for which we found the least evidence of effective work being done. Children and young people were found to have established links into their communities in less than half of the cases inspected. We also looked for evidence they were actively engaged in some form of positive or constructive activity and found this in less than one-third of the cases. These were disappointing findings.
- 3.28. We did, however, find some excellent examples where children and young people believed that the experience of engaging in their community had transformed their lives and supported desistance.

### Examples of notable practice: creating opportunities and community engagement

The case manager had been extremely active in his connections with the college. Angus had received positive feedback about his academic performance and this had led him to trying out some voluntary work that had been set up for him. This was with young adults who had learning difficulties. The case manager had recognised the potential in Angus and had guided him to develop his talents. (Camden YOS)

The YOT had arranged for Amy to carry out her reparation placement putting parcels together for overseas orphanages. This had a real impact on Amy and after the placement had finished she began volunteering at the project. She explained that helping a good cause was important and it had helped her to not reoffend. The sense of responsibility and importance (to her) had been life changing. (East Sussex YOT)

Whilst participating in a reparation placement, Reece commented to the worker that he thought he should go to college. This was promptly relayed back to the case manager who immediately met with Reece to talk about college courses. He then rang the college to make preliminary arrangements. Reece started the following week. He described this moment as a turning point in his life. He emphasised his respect for his case manager for opening up the college opportunity for him. This was a good example of a case manager acting quickly in response to a request made by a young person. (Darlington YOT)

## Promoting positive identity and self-worth

- 3.29. Identity is a broad concept, covering a diverse range of issues including perceptions of self and others and most pertinently the child or young person's definitive identification of themselves as 'criminal' or 'offender'. Desistance research emphasises the importance of this kind of self narrative in children and young people's offending lifestyles. Where a child or young person expresses a desire to change, this can be an important signal of a shift in such self identification, one which YOT practitioners must be able to recognise, assess and respond to.
- 3.30. Changes in self-identity can be linked to other significant life events. This report has contained a number of quotes and examples of experiences which children and young people have told us have been influential in reshaping or redefining how they see themselves, for example, parenthood, a positive reparation experience, a key intervention or a pragmatic response to a crisis, entering the adult world of work or acceptance by others of who they are.
- 3.31. Some of these events are predictable, providing important opportunities for workers to not only provide practical help and support (which in itself can promote engagement), but also to reinforce

the positive aspects of changes in role (becoming a parent) or lifestyle. In other instances it is important for YOT workers to be alert to the possibility of a positive change in self-worth brought about by more contingent and possibly transient opportunities such as entering employment and involvement in a constructive activity.

- 3.32. Changes in how children and young people see themselves and their roles may take some time to come to full realisation, and they may struggle to clearly articulate such a change. As a result, work which YOTs and others have been conducting will not necessarily show immediate results or impact, nevertheless, it can have resonance following a later life event.

#### **Quotes from children and young people about identity**

*"I resent the label 'criminal'. It's upsetting and embarrassing. I've done a lot of thinking and as a result of talking with my worker, I'm going to take control. I'm going to make better choices about my future and make sure I don't get into any more trouble. I won't be a criminal, I'll be me."* (Somerset YOT)

*"Before I would just wander the streets with my mates and get into trouble. I've sorted my head out. I don't want to get into trouble now. I don't want to let my daughter down."* (East Sussex YOT)

*"I'd hit rock bottom – just needed to stop and take the help. I had nothing – selling my clothes for drugs, sleeping on the streets. Just had to. The stuff they'd [the YOT] been going on about suddenly made sense. Up till then I'd just been ignoring it really – it was just something I had to do."* (Cwm Taf YOT)

*"The YOT helped me to change how I saw myself – how I perceived myself. They helped me to showcase my ability and skills in music to a group of people in a hall. I don't see myself as a criminal now. I've set myself new goals and I value myself and others."* (Leicester City YOT)

- 3.33. In this inspection we found examples of distinct aspects of self-identity, including an affinity with offending. Regrettably, YOT responses to those aspects that could lead to positive change - parenthood, other social roles, other life changing experiences and explicit/implicit expressions of desire or need to change was variable.
- 3.34. In most of the relevant cases we examined, YOTs had been proactive in providing practical help and support to young people who had become parents. We also saw a number of cases in which we judged that opportunities had been missed to respond to indicators and motivations for change. In some cases practitioners had difficulty in recognising and responding to issues around identity. This needed to feature more centrally in the supervisory process.

#### **Motivating children and young people**

- 3.35. A key dimension of a desistance based outlook on practice is to understand and recognise that support to children and young people (and indeed their families) must take a long term perspective. Desistance may be punctuated by occasional failures and relapses into crime, even after progress has been made. Keeping all relevant parties motivated and sustained is crucial.
- 3.36. Motivating children and young people can take different forms depending on their circumstances and their level of motivation to move away from offending. Encouraging their commitment through genuine collaboration and development of meaningful, shared goals at the outset of intervention has already been stressed in earlier sections of this chapter. Motivational work may also be necessary at times when children and young people reoffend. Here they need to be encouraged to renew their efforts.

- 3.37. Parents/carers who may be frustrated at what they perceive to be failure need to be supported. Additionally, practitioners must acknowledge and positively reinforce achievements and progress.
- 3.38. We looked for a range of evidence that showed appropriate motivational work had been completed. This included:
- evaluating and discussing the 'strengths' section of Asset
  - the use of techniques such as motivational interviewing
  - professionals' knowledge and understanding of what was important or of interest to the children and young people they were supervising and whether this was used in practice
  - whether parents/carers had been supported to positively reinforce progress.

### **Examples of notable practice: motivating children and young people**

Sergio had been sentenced to a 12 month YRO. His previous involvement with the YOT had resulted in him being returned to court and being re-sentenced for breaching a previous YRO for an offence of assault. The case manager had spent a considerable amount of time with Sergio to better understand why he had failed to comply. It became apparent to the case manager that Sergio's life had been punctuated with failure. Whenever he realised that he had made poor choices he would run away. The case manager began by praising Sergio for this insight and followed up the meeting by sending a hand written letter praising him. On receiving this letter Sergio rang the case manager to thank her saying that he had never received this type of praise before. This began a process whereby Sergio became more communicative and disclosed information not previously known to the YOT. He had kept all 38 statutory appointments at the time of the inspection and the YRO was in the process of being revoked early for good progress. (Darlington YOT)

The case manager had given Alka a certificate to say he was the 'Young person of the month'. This had had a clear impact on him. When interviewed by an inspector, Alka brought the certificate with him. He explained how proud he felt and how this had motivated him to lead a law abiding life. (Leicester City YOT)

- 3.39. The recognition or celebration of achievement was not extensive. The examples given were also somewhat disparate or piecemeal and not systematically linked to the supervision process. We felt there were opportunities to link these together but this kind of methodical approach was mostly absent.
- 3.40. The use of early revocation as a potential motivator (as cited, earlier) did feature in several cases. Disappointingly, we saw relatively little else by way of interventions which used rewards/positive reinforcement as a technique for recognising the achievement of, or changes in specified behaviours (for example, undertaking a desired activity of being ready for school for a week). Simple interventions such as these can be integrated into the work and utilised within families but we did not see any examples of this kind of practice.
- 3.41. It was also discouraging to find that case managers did not always recognise or utilise their knowledge of the kind of activities which motivated and engaged the children and young people they were supervising. Again, these could have been woven into supervision to encourage, engage and provide positive reinforcement.
- 3.42. The use of motivational interviewing was not prevalent. The framework could have been usefully applied to several cases, particularly those in which there had been little substantial progress or progress had stalled.
- 3.43. A particular concern was raised by a number of current service users, especially those who had had several periods of supervision. This related to their experience of having to repeat the same



programmes or interventions which they had done on previous orders. A number complained of finding this extremely demotivating. This highlighted the importance for practitioners to review the work previously undertaken and critically evaluate its impact. They needed to understand what had worked, what had not and what needed to be done differently.

#### Quotes from current service users

*"I love performing and rapping. It's probably the only thing I'm good at. I've got stuff on YouTube. It's had loads of views and 'likes'. I can't talk about stuff so I have to write in a rap. My mum's watched it 'cause some of it is about the s\*\*t way I've treated her. The YOT promised me that they would arrange for me to go to a studio and do some recording. It never happened. I waited six months. They let me down. Why the f\*\*k should I bother with them?"*

*"I've been coming to this YOT for over three years. They're still doing stuff now that they were doing when I was 14. All too basic, too samey – kid's stuff really. I can't be arsed."*

*"I come 'cos I have to but another three months and I'm shot of it... Going over the same old ground... why do I have to do the same old stuff? It goes in one ear and out the other – nightmare."*

- 3.44. We found that the strengths section of Asset was completed fully and comprehensively in just under two-thirds of cases. This was an opportunity missed in the remaining cases, as the desistance research emphasises the need to adopt a strengths-based approach.
- 3.45. Overall, inspectors judged that motivational work had done effectively in just over half of the current cases looked at. This was not good enough.

#### Diversity

- 3.46. Addressing diversity needs effectively is a necessary prerequisite to the delivery of genuinely personalised interventions. Accordingly, the inspection looked carefully at how diversity factors were assessed and addressed. Specifically, this section presents a summary of specific findings from the work done with those who were Looked After Children, girls and young women, children and young people from black and minority ethnic communities and those with a disability.
- 3.47. It is acknowledged that there are many other dimensions to diversity (for example, sexuality or religious belief) but it was not possible to make meaningful comments on these based on the data available. It should also be noted that dedicated academic research on desistance and diversity is sparse.
- 3.48. A total of 18 out of 37 current cases inspected were Looked After Children. This was a high proportion but reflective of this cohort's established record of previous offences and more complex needs. Furthermore, in seven cases, children and young people had either had a Child Protection plan in place or been the subject of *Children Act 1989* s.47<sup>3</sup> investigations during the course of their order. This corroborates research which suggests that being Looked After can escalate a child or young person's involvement with the youth justice system.
- 3.49. Analysis of the work carried out across the eight desistance domains yielded some different results when compared to the sample as a whole. A similar proportion of both self-assessments and learning styles questionnaires had been completed for Looked After Children compared to the overall

<sup>3</sup> Under the *Children Act 1989*, the local authority is required to carry out enquiries when the circumstances defined in section 47 of the Act exist. These include a child being taken into police protection, being the subject of an Emergency Protection Order or where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm.

sample. There was evidence that a higher proportion of self-assessments were then reflected in plans and interventions, perhaps because their statutory reviews stipulate that the views of children and young people must be actively taken into account. There was little difference in how well learning styles questionnaires were utilised.

- 3.50. Other differences included the finding that more peer work had been undertaken with Looked After Children in contrast to the whole sample. This group was also more likely to be engaged in some form of positive activity.
- 3.51. Predictably we found Looked After Children were less likely to have established links to their local community, given that some were accommodated and living away from home.
- 3.52. There were six girls and young women in the sample of current service users. Five out of these six cases were Looked After Children. The majority reported having been in abusive relationships in which they had been subject to assaults, neglect or sexual exploitation.
- 3.53. Although the numbers were small it is striking that virtually all the girls and young women in the sample had been in the care system. This is strongly indicative of both their level of vulnerability and complex needs. This may suggest that the acceleration of Looked After Children through the youth justice system noted earlier may be even more pronounced for girls and young women.
- 3.54. Given this context, we found, as expected, that work around family and personal relationships had been done well in only one-third of the cases compared to just over half of the whole sample. This is consistent with the findings of an earlier HMI Probation thematic inspection<sup>4</sup> on Looked After Children which found that family relationships for those in care were often fractured.
- 3.55. Proportionately more work had been done with girls and young women in relation to peers (five out of the six cases). This reflected work which had been done to promote safe relationships and also, perhaps, the fact that as family ties had fragmented, friendship groups had assumed more importance.
- 3.56. Seven of the current service user sample were from black or minority ethnic communities. Three identified themselves as Black British, three as mixed ethnicity and one as Asian British. In terms of other demographics, six were male and three were Looked After Children.
- 3.57. Children and young people were found to have had some form of disability in just over one-quarter of the inspected cases. The disabilities identified covered a range of conditions including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and emotional and behavioural disorders. A small number had significant physical health issues. For this group, information from self-assessments was more likely to be utilised in plans and interventions. There was also a higher rate of completion of learning styles questionnaires than for the whole cohort. Disappointingly, it was even less evident that these informed plans and interventions.
- 3.58. A higher incidence of non-compliance was recorded for these children and young people. The assessment of barriers and planned responses to them were, however, in line with the overall rates.
- 3.59. Diversity work, encompassing all these aspects, was judged to have been done effectively in just over half of the cases. This was unsatisfactory.

## **Restorative approaches**

- 3.60. Restorative approaches were well embedded into the practice in most of the YOTs we inspected. Reparative and/or victim focused work was evident in two-thirds of the sample. As with former

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<sup>4</sup> HMI Probation (2012) Looked After Children: An inspection of the work of youth offending teams with children and young people who are Looked After and placed away from home. Manchester: HMI Probation Available at:

[http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/probation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2014/03/Looked\\_After\\_Children\\_Thematic\\_Report\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/probation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2014/03/Looked_After_Children_Thematic_Report_ENG.pdf)

service users, inspectors found that the experience of restorative justice work for current service users was mixed. Case manager interviews also revealed some ambivalence about the manner in which reparation work in particular was being used. They reported that they often had little say in what would be effective and children and young people were often slotted into existing projects. These were frequently not relevant to them and did not support desistance work. Far too much time was spent 'pushing' children and young people through unpaid work and this resulted in enforcement action having to be taken.

- 3.61. We did find some excellent examples of how restorative justice and reparation work at its best could yield multiple beneficial 'ripple effects' in terms of improved self-image, self-esteem and worth; engagement with local communities; acceptance in adult settings or 'tasters' of the world of work which had inspired future aspirations.

### Examples of notable practice: restorative approaches

Following contact with Wayne's victim, the YOT had decided to set up a placement where Wayne would be painting a garden fence that belonged to the victim. This was the wish of the victim and Wayne, apprehensively, had agreed. On arriving at the placement Wayne was very anxious and could not exchange any meaningful words with the victim. After sometime Wayne apologised for his stealing. This started a conversation with the victim in which Wayne explained why he had become involved in stealing. The placement had been scheduled for three hours but Wayne stayed for the whole day. During this time the victim shared with him how he too when younger had become involved in stealing and had ended up in custody. Now he owned a gardening business. Wayne was overwhelmed by this and later shared with his case manager that if his victim could do what he had done to turn his life round, so could he. (Darlington YOT)

The manner in which the reparation placement had been planned, managed and delivered was excellent. Sol was asked what he would like to do. He reported that he was fed up with all the litter in his neighbourhood and wanted to clear this up. The case manager (and reparation worker) then worked with Sol in coming up with a plan that would be effective. Through seeing the difference that Sol's efforts were making and hearing how people were grateful for his contribution he decided to explore a career in waste management. He was now attending Connexions each week to make his desire become a reality. (Leicester City YOT)

- 3.62. As with former service users, some of the current service users also found aspects of reparation and victim focused work unhelpful. A small number complained that they found reparation work labelling, boring and/or a chore. Others reported that they had not had any discussion about their reparation placement or the type of work they would like to do. This lack of involvement was not suggestive of a personalised approach.
- 3.63. Some case managers expressed reservations about the way in which reparation, in particular, was used. One characterised the reparation undertaken by some children and young people as being "*junior unpaid work*". We too found that in seven cases, reparation appeared to be a purely punitive adjunct to the substantive order with little evidence of what the 'restorative' content actually entailed or what it was intended to achieve with the child or young person.
- 3.64. It was clear that restorative interventions were integral to the work of the YOTs and that the best examples had a genuine potential for transformation. We judged, however, that overall restorative work was delivered effectively in less than one-third of cases.

# Knowledge and understanding of desistance

# 4

## 4. Knowledge and understanding of desistance

### Introduction

This chapter gives an outline of inspectors' discussions with case managers about their knowledge and understanding of desistance theory, and the extent to which it informed their day-to-day practice.

### Summary

- There were wide variations in practitioners' knowledge and understanding of desistance.
- Few had received dedicated training on desistance theories or their application to practice.
- A majority equated their offending behaviour work with children and young people as desistance practice.

4.1. Case managers, as part of their interviews, were asked to give a self-assessed rating of both their knowledge of desistance theory and the extent to which they applied this to their day-to-day practice using basic 1 to 5 scales (in which 1 represented low knowledge/application and 5 a high knowledge/application).

### Practitioners' knowledge and application of desistance theory

- 4.2. While a small number of practitioners reported that they had received a significant amount of formal training on desistance theory (usually as part of a professional qualification), the vast majority had had limited input. This was evidenced in their partial explanations about desistance theory and its potential application to practice.
- 4.3. A total of 21 case managers provided responses to both ratings (knowledge of desistance theories and application to practice). The aggregated average results showed that their knowledge and application were broadly similar.
- 4.4. Analysis of the more detailed discussions with case managers indicated that, (a) practitioners had some general understanding of desistance, although this was not detailed, and (b) although their knowledge may have been limited, staff felt they had applied desistance principles into practice.
- 4.5. We found that there was confusion among some case managers between desistance principles and 'what works' principles. Too often there was a rather simplistic overlap in their explanation. They linked desistance work to dealing with 'risk factors'. While this is relevant, they were not able to provide a complete account. A number of case managers commented that although desistance theory had not explicitly informed their practice they could 'retrospectively' see how their work had included elements of it. Without exception, they all welcomed this approach.
- 4.6. A small number of case managers clearly had an excellent grounding and understanding of desistance theory, were able to reference relevant research and identify some of the key ideas and implications for practice. It was interesting that these case managers were among the more modest in their self-assessed ratings of knowledge of desistance and its application to practice.
- 4.7. Many case managers had at least some knowledge and understanding and were able to outline some important desistance themes. Encouragingly (given the findings from this inspection) the most well-known factors were those relating to establishing and sustaining strong, trusting professional relationships.

- 4.8. Few case managers reported that they had had any extensive training on desistance theory. A number mentioned having had “briefings” or “one-off sessions” about desistance prior to the inspection, while others recalled its inclusion in the Youth Justice Board training for the Professional Certificate for Effective Practice (Youth Justice).
- 4.9. Others with professional qualifications in social work or criminal justice also said that while they had some course input on desistance as part of their training, this had been delivered as a specific topic rather than providing the wider framework or perspective for practice.
- 4.10. Overall, we concluded that case manager knowledge about desistance thinking and its application to practice was not detailed enough and we detected some confusion about its core concepts. In particular, we found what appeared to be an overly simplistic conflation of offence focused practice and desistance thinking, and consequently a lack of clarity about the relationship between the two. This lack of understanding was also often compounded by the operational context within which workers were practicing.

# Concluding remarks

5

## 5. Concluding remarks

- 5.1. As we have seen, a 'one size fits all' approach to desistance will not be effective, and it is critical that children and young people's voices are heard and their individual circumstances and needs taken into account. In that way, the services that are delivered are more likely to be effective in promoting desistance.
- 5.2. The publication of this report coincides with the Ministry of Justice review of youth justice. We hope our findings are of value to the review, in particular, our finding that of all the things that can promote desistance, those desisters we interviewed found a trusting, open and collaborative relationship with a professional person the most significant. Those relationships take skill and persistence to establish and maintain.
- 5.3. We hope that our findings will be of interest to practitioners, and of material use in their work to encourage and support children and young people to desist from offending and to fulfil their potential as law abiding adults.



# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Glossary

Asset/AssetPlus	Structured assessment tool based on research and developed by the Youth Justice Board looking at the child or young person's offence, personal circumstances, attitudes and beliefs which have contributed to their offending behaviour
DTO	Detention and training order
ETE	Education, training and employment: work to improve an individual's learning, and to increase their employment prospects
HM	Her Majesty's
HMI Probation	HM Inspectorate of Probation
Risk of harm to others	This is the term generally used by HMI Probation to describe work to protect the public, primarily using restrictive interventions, to keep to a minimum the individual's opportunity to behave in a way that is a risk of harm to others
Safeguarding	The ability to demonstrate that all reasonable action has been taken to keep to a minimum the risk of a child or young person coming to harm
YJB	Youth Justice Board for England and Wales
YOT/YOS/YJS	Youth Offending Team/Youth Offending Service/Youth Justice Service

## **Appendix 2 - Role of the inspectorate and code of practice**

Information on the Role of HMI Probation and Code of Practice can be found on our website:

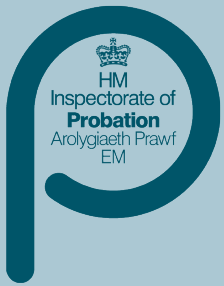
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The Inspectorate is a public body. Anyone wishing to comment on an inspection, a report or any other matter falling within its remit should write to:

HM Chief Inspector of Probation  
1st Floor, Manchester Civil Justice Centre  
1 Bridge Street West  
Manchester, M3 3FX

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ISBN: 978-1-84099-748-4