CLiNKS
Supporting the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

Justice Committee Inquiry:

Children and Young Adults in the Secure Estate

Our response

Introduction

Clinks is the national infrastructure organisation for the voluntary sector working in criminal justice in England and Wales and is the current holder of the HMPPS/MoJ infrastructure grant. We support, promote and represent over 500 members and advocate on behalf of the estimated 1700 organisations working with people in the criminal justice system and their families.

Clinks is also a member of the Transition to Adulthood (T2A) Alliance, a coalition of organisations and individuals identifying and promoting more effective ways of working with young adults, aged 18-25, in the criminal justice system. The Alliance advocates for a system that takes into account the distinct needs of young adults.

In creating our response, we consulted with our Families Network and gathered additional feedback from a number of our members working with children and young adults in the secure estate, consulting with the National Literacy Trust, Nacro, the Shannon Trust, the Prisoners' Education Trust and Catch22 to inform our responses to the questions on education. We also reference the work of additional voluntary sector organisations throughout our response.

Given we do not focus extensively on the youth estate, we have focused almost exclusively on the experience of young adults. Where we explore the experiences of children, this is in relation to the expertise of our Families' Network and through engagement with our members with expertise of these issues. We subsequently provided responses to the following questions: 2, 4, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15 and 16-19.

Summary

The youth estate is often poorly suited to the needs of children and young adults, particularly during the transition to the adult system. Access to purposeful activity, education and healthcare is inconsistent and frequently restricted by staffing shortages, regime constraints and safety concerns.

Education provision is uneven due to operational constraints such as staffing shortages, safety restrictions and reduced time out of cell, which significantly restricts young people's ability to engage in consistent learning.

When turning 18, young adults experience a shift in supervision, with lower staff ratios, fewer supportive relationships and more punitive regimes. Healthcare continuity is also weak, especially for mental health

Limited family contact, inconsistent data sharing for care-experienced children, and high levels of violence and restraint further undermine wellbeing.

The appropriateness and suitability of the youth estate for children and young adults

2. Are children and young people currently able to access purposeful activity, education and healthcare (particularly mental health services) as required whilst in custody?

To note, we have focused our answer to this question on young adults given our role as part of the Transition to Adulthood (T2A Alliance).

Education provision for young adults is limited and often fragmented. Transitions from youth to adult education services are also poorly planned, lacking continuity, and failing to build on progress made in youth settings.

A young person transitioning from the children's to the adult estate will experience 'considerably different' supervision, with many changes including in healthcare provision, family contact and visits, policies around restraint, searching, adjudication and behaviour management, and lower staffing ratios meaning staff are not so readily available, and are less able to build positive relationships and understand and respond to young people's needs.

As demonstrated in the Alliance for Youth Justice's (AYJ) Evidence Review on young people aged 17 to 18 in transition in the criminal justice system, even though the young adult secure estate is designed to provide structured regimes with mandatory education and constructive activity, inspection and research evidence shows significant inconsistency in both access and quality.

It is also important to note that despite recommendations from HMI Prisons, there is no distinct national regime for young adults, even though there is a well-established evidence base on developmental maturity, as discussed in the final section of this response.

Healthcare and Mental Health Provision

The transition from child to adult mental health support presents one of the most significant breaks in continuity of care. When young people turn 18, they typically lose access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and would need to transition to Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS). However, as the AYJ has noted, over 40% of young people accessing CAMHS are not referred to or not accepted by AHMS. In addition, these services operate under higher thresholds, different eligibility criteria and different models of intervention, resulting in disruptive transitions and depleted or entirely removed services. Ultimately, only 5% of young people nationally experience a smooth transition from CAMHS to AMHS with continuity of care.

For those in custody, the risk of falling between services is heightened by a lack of coordinated planning between YOT health teams, custodial health providers, and adult mental health services.

The cumulative effect of these issues is that many young people enter adulthood in custody with reduced access to clinical care, less therapeutic oversight, and increasing levels of unmet need. Ultimately, these findings highlight an urgent need for age-appropriate, developmentally informed, and consistently delivered provision that spans the transition into adulthood, as we have advocated for previously.

4. How does the ability of children in custody to maintain regular, meaningful contact with their families impact their rehabilitation and long-term outcomes?

Regular, meaningful contact with families is central to children's wellbeing in custody and is closely linked to their chances of positive outcomes on release. Families, which can consist of immediate relatives, a child's kin network, co-parents, adoptive or foster parents, friends, ex-partners, siblings and so on, are often the main source of emotional, practical and financial support for young people in contact with the criminal justice system, from the time of arrest to after they are released from custody.

Evidence on social contact in prison settings shows that visits from family can reduce depressive symptoms and help protect against the feelings of isolation that are associated with self-harm and suicide risk, resulting in improved mental health, greater hope and motivation, and better adjustment to the stresses of custody and transition back to the community. Family members also often take on the responsibility of caring for young people and vulnerable relatives, sending essential items such as money, clothing, and books to those in prison, and assists with finding education, employment and housing upon release.

Despite the importance of family connections, according to available data, we know that contact is not always regular. As described in the 2025 Social Contact in Prison report, in the 102 public prisons observed for 12 months to June 2024, everyone between the ages of 15-20 had some form of contact with their families, whether it was face to face or remote.

Nonetheless, for the vast majority, this contact was minimal and irregular, with social contact generally decreasing with age and family contact and visits dropping significantly on transition to the adult estate. Ultimately, only 27% of those aged 15-17 and 16% of those aged 18-20 met the statutory minimum of two or more visits a month.

A lack of contact between a child and their family can be partially attributed to the fact that families frequently encounter barriers to accessing support services and experience a lack of understanding of their diverse and complex needs. Families also face several practical difficulties in supporting their young person in custody, including the distance between where

the child is held and their home, the financial cost of prison visiting, financial pressure to provide the young person in custody with telephone credits and clothing. They also experience a lack of inclusion in the safeguarding process to share concerns and receive feedback.

In order to get around some of these barriers, families require specialist support from voluntary sector organisations working specifically with the families of those involved in the criminal justice system. These organisations have a proven track record of success in providing families with effective support with parenting and addressing bereavement, violence, domestic abuse and mental health. In addition, early family intervention, such as through Family Hubs, has the potential to substantially reduce public costs over the long-term, as well as in the intermediary by proving improved family contact and relationships, reduced family isolation or stigma, improved parenting capacity, confidence and self-esteem for children. With sustained investment, voluntary sector organisations can ensure that this support is attainable for as many families as possible.

Even if regular contact is not possible, it is crucial that any contact is of a high quality for it to be as beneficial as possible. As explained by the Children's Commissioner for England, children want contact which allows them to feel "close" to family, and can experience frustration where visits feel tightly controlled, frequently cancelled, or reduced to short, transactional encounters that do not allow for ordinary conversation, play or affection. Where contact is frequent and feels as close as possible to normal family life, such as in child-friendly visiting spaces and through flexible, child-centred communication, young people are more likely to sustain relationships that provide emotional reassurance, practical support, and a sense of belonging, all of which are recognised protective factors against reoffending.

To ensure that contact is of a high quality, as suggested by the Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT), it is important that contact is always safe, desired by the child, and part of a wider, relational approach that includes help to repair relationships and understand what healthy family life looks like, rather than relying on visits alone as a technical "rehabilitative" input.

Mindful of the fact that the dysfunctional nature of a family can be a contributing factor to a young person's engagement in offending behaviour, custodial institutions and commissioners of resettlement services need to prioritise family engagement in resettlement. Where appropriate, it will be essential to take a 'whole family' approach, giving families an integral role in resettlement and making this role explicit in the commissioning framework.

An individual within the family with responsibility for the well-being of a young person should be identified by prison staff at the first opportunity. Building trusted and consistent relationships is crucial to enhance a young person's motivation to change, increasing their resilience and engagement in services. In order to facilitate this, the expertise and knowledge of custody-based Family Engagement Workers could be utilised to provide a link between the

young person and their nominated family person and also feed information from the family back into the prison and vice versa. This role would go further than simply communicating and updating families but instead involving families in meaningful ways in resettlement planning, thus allowing problems and solutions to be identified and addressed.

7. How effective is data gathering and cross-organizational data sharing for children who are "looked after" by local authorities, and does this information follow the child into the secure estate to inform care?

Children in Local Authority care (LAC) often face significant early trauma, instability and abuse, which can leave them more vulnerable to exploitation and crime. Those who have been in care are four times more likely to receive a criminal conviction and ten times more likely to end up in prison compared to those not in care, and measures to identify and mitigate those risks should include appropriate and systematic sharing of associated data to assist these measures. Accompanying processes should be put in place to avoid stigmatisation.

The Prison Reform Trust's 2016 report, In care, Out of trouble, found that children with experience of Local Authority 'care' are significantly over-represented in the criminal justice system and in custody, especially where they have a particularly poor care experience. Similarly, a 2025 report from the Children's Commissioner for England, the criminalisation of children in care, emphasises that the system is failing children in care by involving the police for behaviour that would not normally attract police attention in a family setting, and that this contributes to a pipeline from care into the criminal justice system.

Given this context, it is particularly disappointing to see that data gathering and cross-organizational sharing for children looked after by local authorities is still inconsistent and is heavily reliant on individual practitioners rather than robust systems, which results in limited or otherwise patchy effectiveness and risks missing critical needs such as experience of trauma or neurodivergence. While there are examples of good practice in non-justice related initiatives such as the Child Protection-Information Sharing (CP-IS) project which automates some data flows between local authorities and the NHS, broader sharing across agencies remains hindered by the timeliness of referrals, quality of local training and protocols, and individual professional practice.

As noted by the AYJ, there is frequent information drop-off at both transition points, from YOTs to probation and from youth to adult custody, variable identification of care-experienced status, and weak multi-agency co-ordination, which undermine continuity of care and planning.

As a result, it is essential to prioritise stronger data-sharing agreements across the statutory and voluntary sector similar to, or as an extension of CP-IS in the justice system, and real-time data transfer to ensure trauma-informed care across the youth custodial estate. These

changes can better support children in the custodial estate, facilitate the creation of stronger joint protocols and earlier resettlement planning which are essential to ensure that children's needs do not get left unaddressed.

To achieve a more joined-up approach to data gathering and cross-organizational data sharing and ensure that data on looked after children by local authorities follows the child into the secure estate to inform care, we have included specific recommendations for Local Authorities, Prisons and Probation and Youth Justice informed by the expertise of our Families' Network.

Local Authorities should:

- Within 5 days of being informed by the Youth Justice team of the custodial remand/sentence, provide information to the custodial establishment by contacting the Offender Supervisor in the prison and offer all relevant information to ensure good care.

- Within 10 days of the sentence to custody, arrange to visit the young person to inform of their Independent Reviewing Officer and to undertake a formal assessment of needs of the young person.

Prisons should:

- Request to be involved in the local authorities' pathway planning for the young person, and that this and the sentence plan are worked on together
- Ensure Prison Offender Managers and Key Workers are aware of the statutory support available
- Let eligible people up to age 25 know how they can request support and help them to request it.
- For young people received into custody, ensure contact has been made with the local authority, social worker, Independent Review Office
- Inform the local authority of release dates and when/if the young person moves establishments

Probation and Youth Justice should:

- Hold regular pathway review meetings especially prior to release, ideally jointly with prison pre- release meetings.

- Enhance support for those transitioning from youth custody to mainstream adult prisons, particularly if it also coincides with transitioning from being in care to leaving care

Violence, safety and disorder

8. What are the key drivers of the high levels of violence, self-harm and the use of restraint/force in the children and young adults secure estate and what immediate and long-term actions are required to ensure a safe environment?

The children and young adults secure estate sees alarmingly high levels of violence, self- harm, and the use of restraint and force largely as a symptom of not properly addressing the complex, unmet needs of their population, characterised by prior trauma, mental health challenges, learning disabilities, and gang-related tensions that spill over into custodial settings. These issues are worsened by overcrowding, very limited out-of-cell time, weak or otherwise insufficient education and activity provision, inadequate staffing with inconsistent training, poor relationships with staff, a punitive culture that prioritises pain-based compliance and poor transitions between custody and community, as described above.

Evidence from a 2021 Justice Committee inquiry on whether the secure estate meets the needs of young people in custody and Youth Justice Board data in particular highlights how the separation and segregation of children and young adults, often used reactively, fail to address root causes of their behaviour. Instead, this punitive culture functions to alienate young people and can potentially triggering further incidents rather than ensuring compliance, as they have proven to fail to act as a deterrent. For example, staff have started to use PAVA spray as a method of restraint and rapid compliance. PAVA works by causing severe burning and pain to the eyes, skin and mucous membranes. These effects persist for a long time after expose, and can be extremely frightening and overwhelming, particularly for those with histories of trauma, neurodivergence or mental health difficulties. As explained by AYJ, rather than de-escalating a situation, the use of PAVA spray fundamentally undermine trust, and is incompatible with efforts to de-escalate a situation.

With this context in mind, immediate actions must focus on enhancing staff capabilities through the implementation of mandatory trauma-informed training. It is also essential to expand the use of restorative debriefs in STCs and SCHs given that they are powerful tools for addressing issues post-restraint, improving relationships, and identifying trigger points in those settings, and prioritising proximity placements to family networks to reduce relational disruptions. In addition, as suggested previously, investment in mental health support and race- and gender-specific interventions provided by voluntary sector organisations, alongside real-time data sharing across statutory and voluntary sectors, would enable proactive risk management and cut reliance on force.

In the long term, it will be important to shift to smaller, community-based facilities which offer sustained through-the-gate support from voluntary sector providers is essential, along with additional emphasis on education and family engagement to dismantle reoffending pathways and foster genuine desistance. These reforms necessitate cross-sector collaboration to create environments where children's safety is achieved through care, not coercion.

Staffing

12. Is the current staffing model (including staff-to-child ratios) adequate across all types of secure provision and what is the impact on child-to-staff relationships, staff retention and support on the quality of care and safety?

The current staffing model falls short of adequacy across all types of secure settings (YOIs, STCs, SCHs) due to chronic understaffing and high turnover rates.

The transition to adult custody presents particular difficulties, as highlighted by the AYJ in their joint report with the T2A Alliance on adultifying youth custody. Children face a "frightening cliff edge," with considerably lower staffing ratios, bigger establishments, harsher restraints, and fewer resources tailored to vulnerabilities like ongoing maturation needs.

Education

14. What is the relationship between inadequate education provision and poor rehabilitative outcomes?

There is an undeniably strong link between inadequate education provision and poor rehabilitative outcomes.

A joint thematic review "A decade of declining quality of education in young offender institutions: the systemic shortcomings that fail children" by Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons, described that between 2014-2024, there has been a "bleak picture of steadily declining educational opportunities and quality", with reduced work opportunities and sharply reduced time out of cell for children, in some cases to as little as half an hour out of their locked cells per day. Similarly, the annual HMI Prisons review "Children in custody 2023–24" found that children "spent the majority of their time locked in their cells, with little done to address their offending" and that fewer children reported getting any education. As explained by the Children's Commissioner in the 2025 report on the educational journeys of children in secure settings, failures in meeting children's educational needs both pre- and in-custody "compound" disadvantage and leave children leaving custody with "limited skills and job prospects."

In many establishments, access to classrooms is dictated more by regime constraints and whether certain children can be around others than by educational need, and ad-hoc resourcing makes it difficult to sustain meaningful, accredited learning pathways.

Digital solutions and in-cell learning resources could help mitigate regime restrictions, but these too depend on adequate investment and staffing. According to anecdotal evidence from one of the organisations we spoke to, where leadership and governance make education a core priority, in some well-resourced establishments, such as HMI Parc, rehabilitative outcomes are noticeably stronger. However, as explained to us by another organisation we spoke to, education cannot holistically support children and young adults coming out of prison by itself. Even if education provision is fully resourced and funded in a prison, there needs to be a fully functioning regime in order for education provision to achieve its desired outcomes and result in the greatest number of benefits for as many children and young adults as possible.

In the absence of any such 'fully functioning regimes' across prisons, literacy levels have become of particular concern. As reported by one organisation during our consultation, many children and young adults arrive unable to read or write to a functional level. Without targeted literacy interventions, they cannot access wider education or training, making desistance and successful resettlement far less likely.

With very limited out-of-cell time, as explained above, children and young adults lack proper incentives encouraging to engage them to engage with education provision as well. Indeed, it is also important to consider that many children and young adults have been excluded from school, creating further barriers for them in terms of their desire in engaging with formal education.

Evidence from initiatives such as the 2026 Reading for Rehabilitation Review by HMI Prisons suggests that poor literacy profoundly shapes post-custody outcomes, a dynamic likely mirrored in the youth sector. Yet, as discussions from our consultation revealed, many young people's additional needs, including neurodivergence and learning difficulties, remain undiagnosed and unsupported.

Despite the importance of addressing these prominent issues, in response to the Justice Committee's 'Ending the cycle of reoffending - part one: rehabilitation in prisons' report, the Ministry of Justice confirmed that the volume of core education delivered in prisons in England will reduce by between 20–25% nationally, as part of the new Prison Education Service contracts. This reduction applies to core literacy, numeracy, ICT and ESOL courses up to level 2. As warned by the Justice Committee, these cuts are 'deeply concerning' as 'any reduction risks jeopardising rehabilitation efforts' in prisons across England and Wales.

The consequences of these cuts have already become visible. For example, the Prisoners' Education Trust explain that they have begun to see courses axed, staff made redundant, and support for people with additional needs put at risk.

Although current evidence is largely anecdotal, the reduction in funding to education will likely function to worsen the revolving-door effect for children and young adults in custody.

Inadequate education provision will prevent effective rehabilitation, while poorly rehabilitated individuals will continue to face higher risks of reoffending and exclusion. Contrary to the Government's plan to cut education provision, breaking this cycle requires sustained investment, trauma-informed practice, and an integrated approach linking education to wider resettlement and support planning, committed to improving the cultures of prison regimes.

15. What specific challenges do education providers face in recruiting and retaining appropriately skilled and motivated teaching staff in youth custody settings?

As revealed in our consultation, education providers in youth custody settings face significant hurdles in recruiting and retaining skilled, motivated teaching staff. These challenges include unsafe environments, regime restrictions and their effects on high-need cohorts, inadequate collaboration in partnerships between voluntary sector organisations and those working in custodial settings and concerns around retaining a workforce and maintaining adequate funding.

Unsafe environments for education providers

We were told of a dramatic increase in violence and disorder levels in education blocks, requiring constant supervision in rooms for safety. Education providers have been increasingly exposed to risks that go beyond those faced in mainstream alternative provision and are now worried not only about children's safety but about targeted attacks on education staff themselves, which is a clear disincentive to join or stay in these roles.

Regime restrictions and high-need cohorts

The joint Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons thematic review, "A decade of declining quality of education in young offender institutions," highlights how sharply reduced time out of cell and growing use of "keep-aparts" have restricted the ability of children aged 15-18 to access education at all. Children often get very limited time out of their cells, so when they do, they may prioritise exercise, showers or phone calls over education, arriving in classrooms with high levels of unspent energy and a strong desire to be elsewhere; this makes teaching extremely challenging and impacts staff morale. The review notes that YOIs now hold a higher concentration of children assessed as violent or otherwise high risk, and that staff struggle to manage complex behaviour effectively, leading to more isolation and cancelled activity.

Education providers are therefore being asked to work with some of the most disadvantaged and high-need children in the system, while those furthest from "coping" in the community,

in terms of housing, mental health, neurodivergence and prior school exclusion, are the least likely to attend education consistently, further eroding teachers' sense of impact and purpose. Despite this, as explained by Nacro, education staff often lack essential support, making the roles unsustainable.

Weak partnerships, blurred accountability and access barriers

Weak collaboration between YOIs and providers leads to isolation and frustration. There are issues such as blurred accountability, inadequate support from YOI staff, and teachers feeling worried about entering these settings. The Ofsted/HMI Prisons thematic review explicitly links declining curriculum breadth and quality to poor relationships between education providers and YOI leadership, alongside unclear lines of accountability for education outcomes.

In practice, this translates into blurred responsibilities between Youth Custody Service (YCS), establishment management and contracted education providers, with no single actor clearly accountable for minimum education delivery or for resolving operational barriers to attendance. Where prison staff do not see education as core business, or where communication between custody and education teams is poor, teachers report feeling unsupported on the wings and anxious about entering residential areas, which discourages both recruitment and retention. Organisations also told us of practical barriers to accessing secure schools and other sites, including protracted or unsuccessful attempts to secure clearance, which means that even specialist services motivated to work with this cohort can end up delivering to only very small numbers of children before withdrawing.

Workforce and funding pressures

At a system level, the quality of education is now directly constrained by providers' inability to recruit and retain sufficient specialist staff. The 2024 Ofsted and HMI Prisons joint review concludes that the breadth and depth of curricula in YOIs have declined over the last decade "due largely to providers' inability to recruit and retain sufficient specialist teaching staff," leading to cancelled courses, closed workshops and core subjects being taught by non-specialists. In some inspections, up to half of vocational workshops were closed because there were not enough staff, and mathematics and English hours were sharply reduced or delivered by staff without the right expertise, with very limited opportunities for children who already hold GCSEs to progress further.

These workforce shortages are now being exacerbated by national policy decisions. As noted above, in January 2026, the Ministry of Justice confirmed that the volume of core education delivered in prisons in England will be reduced by around 20–25% under the new Prison Education Service contracts, as a result of rising delivery costs. With estimates indicating that around 300 prison education teaching staff have already been made redundant, with further

losses expected, and courses are being axed and support for learners with additional needs reduced. Although this announcement relates formally to the adult estate, it sits within the same national commissioning framework and has clear implications for specialist providers' ability and willingness to invest in youth custody staffing where contracts are volatile and provision is being cut by around a quarter in delivery hours.

Impact on staff motivation and retention

Ultimately, these factors combine to create a deeply unattractive employment proposition for skilled teachers. Staff are being asked to deliver high-quality, trauma-informed education in environments characterised by high levels of violence and fear, with restricted time out of cell, frequent cancellations, and limited access to wider support services that would enable holistic work with the most marginalised children. They operate within fragmented governance arrangements where accountability for education outcomes is blurred, and where national policy is shrinking overall education capacity and driving redundancies, rather than providing a stable framework for developing a specialist youth custody education workforce.

As a result, education providers struggle not only to recruit staff with the right mix of subject expertise, SEN and neurodiversity awareness, behaviour management skills and trauma-informed practice, but also to retain those staff once they have experienced the reality of the regime. Many voluntary and community sector partners enter these settings wanting to "do a good thing," but find they are unable to deliver the quality or continuity of provision children need, and so withdraw or scale down activity, further hollowing out the education offer across the youth estate.

Transitions to adult custody

16. How effective is the planning and support for the transition of young people (aged 18+) into the adult prison system and are their complex needs adequately transferred and maintained?

The planning and support for the transition of young people into the adult prison system have improved through targeted programs, such as the Newham YouthtoAdulthood (Y2A) Hub, which is a specialist probation model for young adults. A 2024 evaluation of the Newham Y2A Hub demonstrates effective support in a co-located space with trauma-informed, strengths-based approaches. Key successes include rapid referrals to local voluntary sector organisations which provide services such as training and well-being, flexible enforcement like pre-breach interviews, maturity assessments within 15 days, and a welcoming environment separate from general adult probation, fostering trust and compliance. Staff training on neurodiversity and strong leadership created a "young adult first" ethos, with immediate partner access addressing complex needs better than mainstream services.

However, despite the positive impacts of programmes like the Newham Y2A Hub, there are still notable gaps in consistency in delivering support to those with complex needs which risk re-traumatising young adults that require tailored, continuity-focused interventions.

As mentioned previously, Clinks is a member of the T2A Alliance, and our Director of National Influencing and Networks sits on the Alliance's Campaign Management Group. As a result, we have been focusing on the transition from the youth to the adult estate for a number of years. The organisations that make up the Alliance have published a wide range of research testifying to the distinct challenges faced by young adults in the criminal justice system, such as the AYJ, who have written a report on working with young adults in contact with the criminal justice system for our Evidence Library. This research forms the basis of our answers to the questions regarding young adults (defined as those between the ages of 18-25).

Working with the T2A Alliance, the AYJ highlighted how support for young adults decreases during the transition into the adult estate as part of a three-year project examining the experiences of children and young people turning 18 while in contact with the justice system. The AYJ noted that 'as young people transition into adulthood and move from Youth Offending Teams to Probation, how they are supported changes significantly. Key relationships are lost, contact levels drop, resources and support decreases, and the overall ethos switches from a focus on welfare to enforcement. Transfers are not smooth, information is not picked up, and Probation services may not be tailored to young adults.' AYJ explain that young adults, and girls in particular, who are care-experienced or neurodiverse are at heightened risk.

Transitions from youth to adult custody disrupt child-centred support, replacing it with harsher adult regimes that overlook developmental immaturity. Complex needs like mental health, neurodiversity, and trauma histories frequently fail to transfer seamlessly due to fragmented information sharing between estates. Without support from specialist voluntary sector organisations, these issues lead to disengagement, heightened vulnerability, and worsened outcomes.

17. To what extent should support for young adults (18-25) in custody be determined by their developmental needs rather than age?

Support for young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 in custody should be determined primarily by their developmental needs rather than their age, since age is not the most reliable measure of maturity, capability or support needs and the majority of individuals within this cohort are still transitioning into adulthood, with ongoing cognitive, emotional, and social development. A person's age should only serve as a rough guide.

Evidence shows that the brain continues to develop into a person's mid-twenties, particularly in areas linked to impulse control, emotional regulation, and long-term decision-making. As a

result, many young adults in this age group are more likely to exhibit risk-taking or emotionally driven behaviour.

Particular consideration must be given to individuals exhibiting signs of neurodivergence or trauma, as both can delay or disrupt typical developmental processes. This can further affect maturity, emotional stability, and behaviour, making tailored, trauma-informed approach essential.

Because young adulthood remains a crucial window for personal growth and behavioural change, effective support at this stage can significantly influence long-term outcomes. Developmentally informed interventions can promote learning, self-efficacy, and desistance from future offending. Conversely, overly rigid or age-based systems risk disengaging young people if support feels inappropriate, inconsistent, or punitive.

Consequently, support strategies should focus on responding to these developmental realities rather than assuming equal maturity across all individuals over 18. As argued by AYJ, these strategies need to foster a needs- and maturity-led approach up to at least the age of 25, reflecting robust neuroscience and judicial commentary on the "non-binary" nature of maturation. Criminal justice services should embed these principles at every stage, from custody to resettlement, using flexible, responsive approaches that help young adults navigate the transition to adulthood and realise their potential for positive change.

18. In what ways does treating offenders aged 18-25 as a separate cohort improve outcomes compared to their inclusion in the general adult prison population?

As mentioned above, due to factors such as varying levels of maturity, trauma, neurodivergence and brain development, even if they are the same age, young adults may behave differently from one another during their time in custody and therefore require a distinct developmental approach.

With these factors in mind, in the absence of distinct provision and treatment for this cohort, as noted by the Centre for Crime and Justice, young adults who are prosecuted have been increasingly more likely to be remanded, receive a prison sentence and go to prison for longer, and have been less likely to get a community sentence. AYJ has emphasised a similar pattern, arguing that outcomes for young adults are poor where provision is not distinct, leading to higher rates of self-harm and violence, and minimal engagement in education and other service provision.

For these reasons, treating this cohort as distinct from the older adult population in adult custodial settings may yield better outcomes.

As explained by Revolving Doors in their joint report with the T2A Alliance on diverting young adults away from the cycle of crisis and crime, placing young adults in separate facilities or targeted

programs can result in lower recidivism rates by creating more effective pathways out of crime, yielding substantially better results for individuals, communities, and the wider justice system. For example, Revolving Doors found that police-led pre-charge diversion produces a 6% reduction in reoffending compared with standard court processing, and the adult diversion scheme Checkpoint saw a 10.3% decrease in reoffending prevalence and a 30% reduction in reoffending risk over 24 months.

As advocated above, based on these findings it is essential to provide flexible, development-based support that recognises individual needs, promotes the identity shift, and advocate for services that recognise young adults as a distinct group. In addition, services must gradually transition between a person's time in the youth and adult custodial estate to avoid a sharp drop-off in support. As recommend by AYJ, there must also be a comprehensive evaluation of the experiences of young adults in custody and the development of a national strategy featuring distinct provision for this cohort.

19. To what extent is the current adult prison population environment suitable for addressing the welfare, safety and rehabilitative needs of young adults (18-25)?

We believe that the current adult prison environment is largely unsuitable for meeting the welfare, safety, and rehabilitative needs of young adults aged 18-25.

As explained above, evidence consistently shows that young adults have distinct developmental, emotional, and social needs that differ from those of older adults. Despite these findings, most adult prisons do not differentiate for young adults. Because prisons are primarily designed for an older population and lack the specialist support, education, and relational approaches required to help young adults mature and desist from crime, time out of cell becomes even more limited compared to in the youth estate, consequences are harsher, and engagement in education and work programming is lower. Young adults in adult prisons also face heightened risks to their welfare and safety, including higher rates of self-harm, victimisation and death while in custody.

The current adult prison environment also fails to address the persistent overrepresentation of racially minoritised young people, reflecting wider inequalities in access to support and fair treatment. For example, as noted in the 2021 HMI Prisons report on outcomes for young adults in custody, poor provision for young adults disproportionately affected prisoners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, who were particularly overrepresented in the young adult population.

Consequently, as explained by AYJ, the current adult environment is generally unsuitable for young adults without distinct, resourced provision that follows from and builds upon the support they receive in the youth estate.

Instead of relying on imprisonment, as we have consistently argued, there should be a stronger emphasis on diversion, early intervention, and community-based alternatives that recognise the potential for change during this critical life stage, particularly given that this cohort has been increasingly less likely to receive a community sentence. Where custody is unavoidable, it must be adapted to reflect the specific needs of young adults, particularly those from minoritised backgrounds, ensuring smaller caseloads, trauma-informed support, and access to education, employment, and purposeful activity that fosters personal development.

Supporting the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

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To support, represent and advocate for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

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