



AYJ response to the Ministry of Justice Prisons Strategy White Paper February 2022

About the AYJ

The [Alliance for Youth Justice \(AYJ\)](#) brings together over 70 non-profit organisations, advocating for and with children to drive positive change in youth justice in England and Wales. Our [members](#) range from large national charities and advocacy organisations, to numerous smaller grassroots and community organisations. We bring together the expertise of our members and provide ways for them to shape decision-making. We work to influence policy, legislation and practice to address issues affecting children caught up in crime.

A Ten-Year Vision for the children's secure estate

We welcome that the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has not included the children's secure estate in its strategy for prisons. It is too often the case that children in the justice system are included in proposals primarily designed for adults. However, a comprehensive, long-term vision for the children's secure estate is desperately needed and long overdue.

The government must publish a national strategy and improvement plan for the children's secure estate, including a plan with clear timescales for fulfilling its commitment to close Young Offender Institutions (YOI) and Secure Training Centres (STC), and how it is ensuring children held in these establishments in the meantime have their needs met and rights upheld.

In 2017 the Chief Inspector of Prisons declared no YOI or STC safe to hold children,¹ while the Youth Custody Improvement Board (YCIB) published its findings that the children's estate was 'on the edge of coping'.² In the years that followed, up to the pandemic, levels of violence, self-harm, restraint, and separation increased.³ The YCIB recommendations called for a clear vision for the youth custodial estate and a consolidation of existing structures,⁴ but five years on progress on many YCIB recommendations remains unclear. In 2016, in response to Charlie Taylor's youth justice review, the government confirmed it would create two secure school pilots.⁵ Six years on the first pilot is yet to open, and there is no news on any plans for a second pilot. Children's experiences in custody during COVID-19 have been 'bleak'⁶; 40% of children in custody are unsentenced; over half of children in custody are 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic'; STCs are unsafe and in turmoil; and there is a national shortage of secure children's homes beds.⁷

Custody numbers are at a historic low, yet the fall in numbers has not led to an improvement in children's treatment and experiences. With a clear vision and commitment to these children, their relatively small numbers presents an important opportunity to improve outcomes. We urge the government to publish more information and clear timescales on their plans for youth custody, including how the introduction of Secure Schools fits into a long-term strategy for the children's secure estate. This is particularly important in light of measures in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill that are predicted to increase the number of children in custody.

A lack of focus on racial disproportionality

Overall, the Prisons Strategy White Paper contains a shocking lack of action or even acknowledgement of the need to 'explain or reform' the overrepresentation of racially minoritised people and their differential treatment in prisons.

The Lammy Review highlighted racial disparity in youth justice as its 'biggest concern', and since the review racial disparity in youth custody has only worsened. Racially minoritised children now make up more than half of children in custody, including nearly 10% identified as Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT),⁸ despite GRT people constituting around 0.1% of the population.⁹ During their time in custody,

racially minoritised children consistently report relatively worse experiences and treatment.¹⁰ The government's national strategy and improvement plan for the children's secure estate must set out a vision for addressing racial injustice.

Further measures for early intervention to tackle youth offending

The Prisons Strategy White Paper contains one mention of investment in early intervention for children. While we welcome this approach, given the strategy focusses on adults, we are unsure as to why the proposal is mentioned in this set of proposals. We are aware that the £200 million investment to "improve prison leavers' access to accommodation, employment support and substance misuse treatment, and introduce further measures for early intervention to tackle youth offending" was announced in the 2021 Autumn Budget. We and our members are keen to learn more about this funding and be involved in discussions with the MoJ about how it is being allocated.

Cross-HMPPS fast track scheme

We are concerned about the implications of the creation of an HMPPS workforce fast track scheme that would see the cohort spend time working across prisons, probation and youth justice. Those working in youth justice should be child specialists and the rationale for including the youth justice workforce in this scheme is unclear. It is also unclear how this scheme will interact with the new Foundation Degree in Youth Justice. We request more information on these plans.

Young Women's strategy

We have been working in partnership with Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, on the Young Women's Justice Project, aiming to shed light on the experiences of girls and young women aged 17–25 in the criminal justice system.¹¹ The project has highlighted the critical need for a specific strategy for young women, so we warmly welcome the commitment to a Young Women's Strategy. We refer to Agenda for a more detailed response.

Transition of young people from the children's to adult estate

As part of the Young Women's Justice Project, we recently published research examining young women's experiences as they turn 18 and transition from the youth to adult justice system.¹² The AYJ is interested in continuing and expanding our work focussed on transitions of young people from the children's secure estate to adult prisons. We look forward to hearing more about the young adult transition unit pilot and are keen to engage with work in this important area.

We would like to refer to our member Khulisa's response to this white paper which expands on transitions, and training for prison staff working with children and young adults. We would also like to support our member Nacro's response regarding Friday releases.

The contents of this briefing do not necessarily reflect the views of all AYJ member organisations

¹ <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmprisons/inspections/annual-report-2016-17/>

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/594448/findings-and-recommendations-of-the-ycib.pdf

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2019-to-2020>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/594448/findings-and-recommendations-of-the-ycib.pdf

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576554/youth-justice-review-government-response-print.pdf

⁶ <https://www.ayj.org.uk/news-content/covid-project-literature-review>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-201920-education-childrens-services-and-skills>

⁸ <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/CYP-report-2019-20-web.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/whatdoesthe2011censustellusaboutthecharacteristicsofgypsyoririshtravellersinenglandandwales/2014-01-21>

¹⁰ <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmprisons/inspections/children-in-custody-2019-20/>

¹¹ <https://www.ayj.org.uk/young-womens-justice-project>

¹² <https://www.ayj.org.uk/news-content/falling-through-the-gaps-pub>