

## Six steps forward for diversion in the youth justice system

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In 2020, we published our briefing '[Strengthening youth diversion](#)', which outlined an action plan for policymakers to strengthen evidence-led point-of-arrest youth diversion. Over the past two years, we have been observing a number of incremental but important changes taking place in the youth justice system, which has made us hopeful for the future of diversion schemes, and the positive impact they can have on children's lives.

We took the opportunity to reflect on how the justice system has moved forward in this time, and celebrate some of the changes that we have been particularly pleased to see.

### 1. Diversion makes it into the dictionary! (of Youth Justice Board definitions)

An easy-to-access [definition of diversion](#) is an excellent new addition to the Youth Justice Board's (YJB) resources, which will support practitioners and policymakers working in a field that is full of often changing terminology. We hope that this will help foster a common approach and help avoid confusion, particularly around similar yet distinct approaches such as diversion and prevention.

### 2. A new 'how to guide' for producing youth justice plans

Earlier this year, the Youth Justice Board published new [guidance](#) for youth justice services on how to complete their annual youth justice plans. We think this is an invaluable tool for practitioners, that will encourage reflection on important areas of their work, such as incorporating the voice of the child, tackling racial disproportionality and implementing a child first approach. We are particularly pleased to see the guidance include advice on how to effectively cover diversion in a youth justice plan, for example including information on the plan about how children are identified for diversion, how the service is delivered, how success is evaluated and what scrutiny is in place.

### 3. Putting the spotlight on the Youth Gravity Matrix

The Youth Gravity Matrix is a decision-making tool used by the police to determine the seriousness of an offence, and was first published in 2013. In Autumn 2021, the YJB and the National Police Chief's Council launched a consultation into how the matrix is used, as well as how it can be improved.

We welcomed this review, as the matrix score determines if each child is eligible for an out of court disposal, and therefore plays a crucial role as a gateway to diversion. To feed into the review, the Centre held a workshop with the YJB for practitioners who regularly use the matrix to feedback on how decisions are made, and the impact they see it having on children.

To enable children who could benefit from diversion to access a diversion scheme, the eligibility criteria must follow the [evidence base](#) and good practice, which points towards empowering practitioners to use professional discretion on a case-by-case basis. This approach also has positive implications for facilitating equal access to diversion for all children, which we recently explored in our report on racial disproportionality, '[Equal Diversion?](#)' We look forward to the outcome of the review.

#### 4. The child first approach goes mainstream

The YJB have rooted [its vision](#) for the youth justice system in a child first approach, which they define as treating children as children, and minimising contact with the youth justice system where possible.

The child first approach, and its implications for championing diversion, have great potential for minimising the [labelling of children](#) as an ‘offender’, and the long-term harm associated with interacting with the justice system as a child. We are excited to see how this approach grows and spreads across the wider youth justice system.

#### 5. Reasons to be pleased from the inspection of youth offending services

The latest [inspection report](#) of youth offending services draws out some good practice principles from areas that performed well in delivering out of court disposals. Completing a thorough assessment of the child, involving them and their family or carers, and considering the perspective and needs of the victim, were identified as contributing factors to high-quality decision-making at the multi-agency panels, and delivering appropriate interventions.

We were also heartened to read in the inspectorate report that out of court disposal case management has improved since the previous year, with the assessment, implementation and delivery undertaken well.

The report shows that risk management was not as highly rated as other aspects of out of court disposals and diversion practice. Our conversations with practitioners have highlighted the need for practical guidance from HMIP and the YJB, that builds on what effective risk management assessment looks like in line with the [ethos of diversion](#), to minimise labelling, avoid net widening and prevent overdosing.

To further strengthen the important work of HMIP, we believe that diversion should be treated as a separate area to out of court disposals. This would emphasise the fact that it is not a subcategory within it, but is a distinct approach that is - crucially - not associated with a criminal record.

#### 6. Building a picture of youth diversion in England and Wales

The YJB have updated their [data recording requirements](#) for YOTs to include diversionary outcomes when they submit data to the Youth Justice Board. The guidance lists which outcomes are mandatory to record and which are voluntary, intended to build a more complete picture of YOT caseloads and diversionary work.

These are welcome changes, as the more we understand about what diversion activity is taking place and where, the better we can understand how well the needs of children are being addressed, whether particular groups are being treated equitably, and what a more effective funding system might look like.

The data recording system and standards for diversion could even better recognise the hard work of YOTs and the police across the country, by making it compulsory to record other pre-court outcomes, including community resolutions that are facilitated exclusively by the police or other agencies. Read more about the importance of getting data collection right in our [‘Strengthening youth diversion’](#) briefing.

We hope this briefing will inspire areas to reflect on and develop their own practice. To learn more about our policy and research work, the range of practical support we offer, please visit [our website](#).

## About the Centre for Justice Innovation

The Centre for Justice Innovation seek to build a justice system which all of its citizens believe is fair and effective. We champion practice innovation and evidence-led policy reform in the UK's justice systems. We are a registered UK charity.

Written by: Lucy Slade

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### **Centre for Justice Innovation**

Unit 102, Edinburgh House  
170 Kennington Lane, London SE11 5DP  
Telephone +44 (0) 203 735 9436

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