

A Strategic Framework for Youth Justice

Our Context:

Since the devolution of Justice in 2010, much has been achieved to improve the youth justice system in Northern Ireland. Developments in policy and practice, including a focus on diverting young people away from further offending at the earliest possible point in time, have contributed to a significant reduction in the number of children committing crimes and entering the formal youth justice system. This is good for everyone and is helping to deliver on the principal statutory aim of the youth justice system which is “to protect the public by preventing offending by children.” Children who do offend often have difficult backgrounds and may have lived through a number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Not all children with ACEs will enter the youth justice system but for those who do, we are determined to support them in turning their lives around and avoiding a negative cycle of further offending which would have a detrimental effect on them, their families and society as a whole. Excellent progress has already been delivered in this area, led by the Youth Justice Agency.

While much has been achieved, there is still more to do. Our Strategic Framework will continue to build on progress made, taking a children first approach to youth justice. The legislative framework for youth justice requires updating; too many children are entering custody simply because they have no suitable bail address; more could be done to simplify key elements of the youth court process, particularly around the number and structure of court-ordered community sentences. These issues need to be addressed. While our Strategic Framework focuses on the youth justice system, it also explicitly recognises the value of working with a wider set of partners who share our aims of improving the well-being and life chances of vulnerable children. By doing all this, we believe that outcomes will be better for children, families and victims.



Making the Change

This Strategic Framework for youth justice will focus on:

Earlier Stage & Pre-Court Diversion: Working collaboratively with statutory and third sector partners to:

- Exit children from the criminal justice system, with appropriate support, through delivery of Earlier Stage Diversion;
- Evaluate the rollout of Children’s Diversion Forums as a regional service;
- Explore proposals for the development of a diversionary disposal which does not attract a criminal record.

Improving Outcomes for those affected by offending: Reviewing current youth justice disposals and improving effectiveness by:

- Designing and introducing a single, flexible order to replace current community disposals;
- Developing a pilot for child-friendly youth court hearings, informed by problem solving approaches;
- Developing and delivering an Enhanced Case Management framework for high risk and vulnerable children;
- Continuous service developments through implementation of YJA’s new Model of Practice.

Custody as a last resort: Delivering on our UN and international commitments to use custody as a last resort by:

- Implementation of a new Regional Care and Justice Campus, in partnership with the Department of Health;
- A range of associated work including alternative place of safety arrangements and new models of education, health and therapeutic care;
- Amending legislation to improve arrangements for bail and remand for children.

Systemic issues: To explore the potential for reform of wider systemic issues affecting children in the justice system, including:

- Engagement with stakeholders on the issue of increasing the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility;
- Consideration of issues creating delays in progressing youth court cases and addressing causal factors;
- Reviewing scheduled offences which may be disclosed as part of a criminal records check and underpinning filtering arrangements in legislation;
- Simplifying and streamlining the youth justice statutory framework through a consolidated Children’s Justice Bill;
- Working with partners to understand and address factors contributing to an over-representation of certain groups in the youth justice system;
- Developing partnerships to find additional ways of preventing youth homelessness.



Measuring the impact:

How will we know what success looks like? We will use a range of published data and management information to measure the impact our changes are having. These will include:

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| ❖ Published YJA Annual Workload statistics | ❖ Published Case Processing Times | ❖ Data from Children’s Diversion Forums |
| ❖ Published First Time Entrants reports | ❖ Published Youth Engagement Bulletins | ❖ YJA engagement and satisfaction rates from children/parents/victims |
| ❖ Published statistics on prosecutions and diversion | ❖ YJA ESD data on referrals and reoffending rates | ❖ Relevant evaluations of pilots and programmes |
| ❖ Published Reoffending Rates | ❖ Published inspection and annual reports | ❖ Case Studies and personal testimonies |

Our Vision:

A progressive youth justice system – delivering better outcomes for children and communities.

Desired Outcomes:

Children are exited from the criminal justice system at the earliest point, with appropriate support.

Positive outcomes for children, families, victims and communities affected by offending.

Children will only ever be placed in custody as a last resort.

Working in partnership to deliver wider systemic change to improve the lives of children.



Our Principles:

Children involved in the criminal justice system should always be treated as **children**.

The criminal justice system should act in the **best interests** of children in all of their interactions.

The criminal justice system should ensure **children’s rights** are respected at all times, and should align with international standards.

The criminal justice system will take a **trauma-informed** approach at all stages, recognising the impact of their lived experiences.

The **views of children** will be heard, respected and taken account of.

Children should be **diverted** from the criminal justice system at the earliest possible stage, with appropriate support.

A child should only ever be placed in custody as a **last resort**.