



# EMBEDDING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND RESEARCH EVIDENCE IN YOUTH JUSTICE PRACTICE

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## CONTEXT

The fundamental role of every Youth Offending Team in England and Wales is the same; to reduce offending by children and young people, and oversee the coordinated delivery of services to young people, particularly those who are in trouble with the law. Each Team therefore has a statutory constitution that necessitates collaboration with other services. These services include social work, probation, police, education, healthcare and other services.

In Wales specifically, Youth Offending Teams have to work collaboratively with devolved services (such as education and healthcare services) which are subject to the Welsh Government's stated commitment to a rights-based approach that complements relevant Articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Consequently, Youth Offending Teams have to uphold several rights-based principles enshrined in the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and Welsh Government (WG)'s Children and Young People First, Offenders Second (CFOS) policy. This child-centred policy also

underpins the stated values and aspirations of the wider YJB for England and Wales and it is embedded in the 'child-centred' strategic plan for youth Justice. The new strategic document for Wales also emphasises the children first principle and the aligned delivery of services by devolved and non-devolved services (Ministry of Justice 2019)<sup>3</sup>. In Wales, the CFOS policy places responsibilities on practitioners to safeguard the rights of children and young people who are supervised by Youth Offending Teams. To achieve this, Youth offending Teams are expected to work towards several outcomes.

In their evaluation of the Pembrokeshire Youth Justice Team in Wales (which involved piloting a Youth Justice Evaluation Inventory that was designed in collaboration with YJB Cymru who also funded the evaluation), researchers from the University of Southampton and Swansea University found evidence of best practice in most of the following areas, and the researchers recommend that other Teams should adopt these practices.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

For teams providing Youth Justice services.



### PRACTICE ETHOS: COMPLIANCE WITH UNCRC PRINCIPLES

**The dominant practice culture within a Youth Justice Team should reflect the Child First policy prevailing in Wales.** Best practice in relation to this policy can be found in Youth Justice Services which have in place practices and arrangements that are geared towards the five outcomes in the table below:

Best practice outcomes*	Examples
a well-designed partnership approach	<b>Inter-agency collaboration:</b> working collaboratively with relevant agencies to deliver services
early intervention, prevention and diversion	<b>Prevention and diversion:</b> preventing the entry of children and young people into the Youth Justice System and diverting them away from the system
reducing reoffending	<b>Preventing reoffending:</b> recognising the vulnerability of children and young people, and diverting them to relevant services
effective use of custody (custody should be used as a last resort)	<b>Custody as a last resort:</b> commitment to belief that the use of custody should be avoided wherever possible
reintegration and resettlement strategies	<b>Appropriate resettlement services:</b> Providing relevant support and assistance

1 (Youth Justice Board 2014) [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/374572/Youth\\_Justice\\_Strategy\\_English.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/374572/Youth_Justice_Strategy_English.PDF)

2 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/706925/201804\\_YJB\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_2018\\_21\\_Final.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/706925/201804_YJB_Strategic_Plan_2018_21_Final.pdf)

3 Ministry of Justice (2019) Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales. [https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/youth-justice-blueprint\\_o.pdf](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/youth-justice-blueprint_o.pdf)

\* Source: Youth Justice Board/Welsh Government (2014) Children and Young People First. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/374572/Youth\\_Justice\\_Strategy\\_English.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/374572/Youth_Justice_Strategy_English.PDF)



## RESEARCH-INFORMED PRACTICE SKILLS

To ensure that evidence-based effective skills are embedded in practice, **practitioners should have the opportunity to conduct self-evaluations**, and where possible, peer evaluations. These should involve comparing practice skills with the skills that have been shown by a large body of research, to help produce positive outcomes for children and young people, and it can complement other evaluation strategies such as the YJB's peer review programme and the HMIP's use of peer inspectors.

The research team have developed and made available to Services (subject to relevant permissions) **a versatile, digital, user-friendly evaluation checklist for self-evaluations and peer-evaluations of practice. The checklist should be used by Teams** to promote the use of these skills and to help practitioners record and develop longitudinal evidence of evidence-based practice

The user-friendly, digitised checklist is a versatile pdf document which can be completed on a range of devices, from laptops and desk tops to tablets and mobile devices.

Self-evaluations of practice and where possible, peer evaluations, using the digitised checklist can help ensure that evidence-based effective skills are embedded in practice. Both types of evaluations involve comparing practice skills with the skills, which according to research evidence, can help produce positive outcomes for children and young people. These evaluations can also provide additional benefits:

**Professional development** – A digitised evaluation tool that facilitates self-and peer-evaluations can contribute to professional development by ensuring that practitioners enhance their practice in line with the research evidence of effective practice and also by ensuring that training needs are identified.

**Reflective practice:** The digitised tool can give staff opportunities to reflect on how to embed evidence-based skills in frontline practice. This can contribute to reflective practice.

**Identifying best practice:** The tool can support practitioners' efforts to identify, document, and share examples of best practice.

**Quality assurance** – the tool can also operate as an effective internal quality assurance mechanism which helps ensure that youth justice services are maintaining good standards of practice.

**Evidence based practice** - Using a digitised tool that derives from evidence of effective practice skills is useful for ensuring that service delivery is evidence-based.



## ASSESSMENT PRACTICE

Effective assessments are vital for identifying and responding to children and young people's needs and strengths. **Youth Offending Teams are required to periodically undertake assessments of young people's needs and strengths**, and the protective factors that can encourage desistance from offending and improve young people's lives. The outcomes of assessments should inform service delivery.



## PRACTICE EVALUATION STRATEGIES

**Youth Offending Teams should institute quality assurance strategies that can improve practice.** Internal and external evaluation strategies for assessing and maintaining good standards of practice are useful for this purpose. Other useful strategies are: collecting outcome data and other information on performance indicators such as such as arrest and reconviction data; and data on improvements in other areas including access to housing, education, training and employment.



## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

**There should be a service-level commitment to staff development to facilitate effective implementation of the service's goals.** Provisions for staff training and continuing professional development should be in place. Teams should also institute and implement line management supervision strategies. These are associated with reduced stress and improved staff satisfaction.



## STAFF SATISFACTION

**Youth Offending Teams should have in place strategies for maintaining staff satisfaction. This should include facilitating staff cohesion and a collaborative culture.** To achieve this, there should be effective conflict/dispute resolution mechanisms in place. Other mechanisms include regular staff/team meetings and adequate line management supervision. Furthermore, measures should be in place for celebrating staff success and praising staff for their achievements. Staff should also feel empowered to develop and apply innovative practices.



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