

09 September 2021

Chief Inspector of Probation Justin Russell: Youth Justice Conference 2021

Inspecting youth offending service partnerships – what does 'Good' look like?

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Given that the theme for today's conference is about improving youth justice outcomes through partnership working, I thought I'd focus my talk today on what our inspection evidence tells us about what good partnership working looks like.

Although we're called Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, since 2003 we've also been inspecting youth offending services (YOS).

Right at the heart of that Youth Offending Team (YOT) model, from its very beginning, has been effective partnership. They were set up on a statutory basis 20 years ago, not just to be multi-agency talking shops but to be multi-agency partnerships in the way they actually operated and managed children on their caseloads too – with a statutory duty to cooperate upon local authority children's services, the police, probation, and health services.

And partnership has remained right at the core of effective YOT work, as that model has evolved, and is a key thing that we look at as an inspectorate. In our inspections we're looking at two aspects of partnership, in particular:

Firstly, at a strategic level, is the YOT bringing all the relevant partners together in its governance arrangements – do they have a shared vision of what the priorities are? Do they advocate in their own organisation for the YOS and for the children on its caseload?

And second, when we inspect individual cases – and we look at hundreds of these each year – is there evidence that case managers are working effectively with other agencies to support and supervise the children on their caseloads? Are there arrangements for jointly discussing and planning for the most complex and high-risk cases? But also, for the lower risk cases as well, to ensure that children are diverted from the criminal justice system, where that is appropriate, but receiving the necessary interventions too.

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In practice, these sorts of issues then translate into some standard prompt questions that our inspection teams will ask at every YOS they visit. This helps inform the overall rating we give each service – including the specific rating we give to one of our standards – which is all about partnerships and the range and quality of services offered to children.

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We've been asking these questions and applying these ratings since 2018 and have published 62 local reports so far – all of which can be seen on the [Inspectorate's website](#). As can be seen from this bar chart [see slide 3 of the presentation], we find a range of performance on our key standard around partnerships and services, but a majority (61 per cent) of Youth Offending Services we have rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' – though only one-fifth were outstanding, so there is still some significant room for improvement.

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I'll say a bit more about the characteristics of effective partnership working later, but our data seems to suggest that this is easier for smaller YOTs than for some of the larger YOTs covering bigger cities or counties. So, for example, across the 23 smallest YOTs we've inspected – group 1 on the left of this chart – 70 per cent of these were rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' on partnerships and services – including over one-third who we felt were 'Outstanding'. At the other end of the scale only 13 per cent of the largest YOTs we visited – those with over 72 cases – were 'Outstanding'.

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At the heart of effective strategic partnership needs to be strong governance and an effective and well-functioning youth offending service management board.

Good management boards exemplify partnership in action. They have active and committed chairs – often, these days, directors of children's services – and senior representatives from all the relevant statutory agencies (for example, local police borough commanders and local probation heads of service). People who have the seniority, clout and commitment within their own organisations to get things done on behalf of the YOT. They will also draw on a rich range of management information on the needs and progress of the children from a wide range of sources. And they'll be able to link the YOS to other key strategic forums. Most of all they will advocate for the YOT and the children it works with.

Poor management boards, on the other hand, have frequent changes of chair and insufficiently senior representatives who fail to advocate outwards for the YOT or to properly scrutinise downwards leading to poorer-quality delivery and lack of board-level oversight of performance issues, around risk and public protection. Some members fail to turn up at all.

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We've found that high performing YOTs also have a voice in other key local partnership meetings and are able to advocate for the interests of their children at those meetings. That might include, for example, raising the issue of ethnic disproportionality within the youth justice system with criminal justice partners at the local Criminal Justice Board. Or, successfully arguing for resources for serious youth violence initiative at local violence reduction strategy meetings or raising concerns about further education college admission processes or permanent exclusion rates with local headteachers.

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Strong operational partnerships between frontline staff are as important as strategic partnerships.

Over the past five years this has been helped by more and more YOTs moving to local authority structures, within children's services directorates, where they often sit alongside Early Help or Looked After Children's teams or in new adolescent services divisions. This creates great opportunities for YOT case managers to be colocated with and work more closely with other frontline colleagues.

But we've found it's also important for YOTs to maintain a separate identity within children's services, given their specific role in delivering the orders of the youth court and managing risks to the wider public, as well as the wellbeing of the child. So, operational links to the police, courts and rest of the CJS remain equally important. Where a service

becomes completely absorbed within a children's services department, and loses that separate identity, problems follow and our ratings start to slide.

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When inspecting a local youth offending service, we expect to see it provide a rich and diverse range of services to the children and families it is working with, including:

- Parenting and family support/mentoring, domestic abuse support.
- Mental health (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).
- Physical/sexual health (for example, the school nurse).
- Reparation/community payback and victim work (e.g. restorative justice).
- Social care (child protection/Child in Need/looked after children/care leavers).
- Speech, language and communication needs.
- Substance misuse, offending behaviour work, cognitive behavioural interventions.

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Good YOTs increasingly include a range of embedded specialist staff – either on a full or part time basis, which can for example, include CAMHs workers, speech and language support, sexual health and drugs workers, ETE or connexions workers. For smaller YOTs, where caseloads may not be large enough to justify a salaried staff member, we could expect to see well developed and well-functioning referral arrangements to outside specialists so that children on YOT caseloads can get the assessments they need, without long delays.

There are also expectations that statutory partners should make available staff to their local youth offending service. While this seems to work well with the police, who usually provide committed seconded officers, able to link the YOT up to police intelligence systems and help with out of court disposals. Secondment arrangements with probation or health can be patchier – with vacancies or inadequate staff cover more common on our inspection visits.

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As well as making judgements on broad organizational arrangements we also inspect individual cases.

A recent research bulletin, by the Inspectorate's research team, [[Bulletin – Multi-agency work in youth offending services](#)] has analysed almost 2,000 cases inspected since 2018 in relation to the quality of multi-agency work done at every stage of supervision from assessment through planning to coordination of delivery of services – including the initial identification of needs and at how well the child's own safety and wellbeing is being supported.

In a significant majority of cases we looked at we found that multi-agency coordination was satisfactory with good cooperation between YOTs and other services in relation to assessment and planning.

In four out of five cases, we found that the YOT worked well with others to promote community integration and access to other mainstream services – though that was less true for looked after children.

And in relation to work done to keep children on YOT caseloads safe – over 70 per cent of assessments we reviewed drew sufficiently on a range of information sources from other agencies. And we found the safeguarding services delivered were sufficiently well coordinated in a similar proportion of cases

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Drawing on these research insights, my research team suggest the following effective practice pointers:

- Assessments should incorporate all available sources of information to understand the whole context of the child's life.
- The various assessments should be pulled together into a single document that identifies and summarises these diverse sources, facilitating understanding by all partners of the child they are working with.
- Planning should involve all relevant agencies to ensure that they all understand how promoting the child's welfare contributes to promoting safety and public protection.
- good sequencing is essential to ensure that interventions are delivered in a way that will have the most impact.
- The YOT case manager should act as a champion to other agencies and services, for example encouraging children's services to include appropriate actions within a child in need plan or advocating an intervention from CAMHS.

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In addition to individual case management, youth offending services are developing increasingly effective operational partnerships to manage specific cases on their caseloads.

This ranges from panels for managing lower risk out of court diversion cases to the most complex, potentially highest harm cases who also often have the highest risks to their own well-being – through criminal and/or sexual exploitation.

From July this year, we've introduced a new standard for inspecting out of court disposal policy and practice, at the heart of which is a clear expectation that out of court panels should be genuinely joint decision making panels which at a minimum involve YOTs, police and social care. And these should be informed by YOS assessments and recommendations made before not after the panel meets.

Brighton and Hove YOT, which we recently gave an overall outstanding rating to, is now firmly integrated with the adolescent services part of the local authority and has used that to develop some interesting ways of partnership working around more complex or higher risk cases. So, for example:

They have a weekly Adolescent Vulnerability Risk Meeting (AVRM) – jointly chaired by the YOS Head of Service and police but also including children's social care, health, community safety, education, sexual health and family therapy workers – which considers around eight cases a week, open either to social care and/or to the YOT, which are considered particularly high risk of harm or exploitation. Each case is presented by the lead case worker and follow up action by relevant agencies is agreed, which can include a referral to Brighton's extended adolescent service which can work more intensively and flexibly with children outside usual office hours at weekends and evenings, including, for example trying to get a child back into school.

Sometimes the sheer number of different staff and agencies working with a young person can get in the way of effective partnership and be stressful for the child themselves. Under the AMBIT model, which is being adopted across the whole of Brighton children's services, the various agencies involved with a child meet to agree which of them has the strongest relationship with the child and they then become the key worker who owns that relationship with the other agencies forming a *team around the worker* to support them to deliver an integrated set of interventions.

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At Camden YOT, the first urban and London service to be rated outstanding against our new standards in 2020, we spotted at least three interesting partnership innovations, which included:

1. The **Enhanced Constructive Resettlement** scheme, established as a partnership between the organization New Horizons, the YOT and the local health trust which pays weekly visits to children in custody and then supports them for as long as they want help after release including as they transition into adult services – and had already achieved 55 contacts with 10 children within two months of being set up in March 2019.
2. The **'Engage' programme** – established between the Met Police and Camden YOS in February 2019, to work with children picked up and referred by dedicated workers in police custody who weren't previously known to the YOS but are at risk of exploitation or serious youth violence who can then be quickly referred for an intervention including through family workers.
3. **And a Daily Risk briefing** – daily conference call, between the YOS manager, police, Early Help, MASH staff and other agencies where the police to share general intelligence relating to public protection and the safety and well-being of children known to the YOS who they have had contact with over the previous 24 hours.

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So, in conclusion, our inspection evidence shows that:

Good Collaboration – with partners, providers and the local community is integral to effective service planning and delivery. And we find a majority of YOTS do this well. That collaboration needs to be both **strategic and operational** – both are essential.

A **strong mix of targeted, specialist and mainstream services** is also essential to provide the necessary range and depth of intervention to meet the full range of complex needs shown by children in the youth justice system.

Shared knowledge, assessments, planning between agencies – are all necessary to ensure effective sequencing and coordination of interventions.

Structured panels and clear protocols are also needed – so roles, responsibilities and processes – including referral and eligibility criteria and follow up actions are all agreed and in the best interests of the child.

And we all need to **learn from the best** – many of you already do this well but there's always things to improve. Share good practice and keep innovating and evaluating everything you do.