



Rheolwyr Timau Troseddu Ieuenctid Cymru
YOT Managers Cymru



Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyfiawnder Ieuenctid

A summary highlighting good practice in Youth Justice during the COVID-19 pandemic in Wales (July 2020)

1. Introduction

The last few months have seen unprecedented changes in the way youth offending teams (YOTs) have been working, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions on the way in which everyone has been able to operate professionally and socially. Working practices have been amended to comply with Welsh Government guidance and Public Health Wales advice.

At the start of the lockdown in March, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) asked all YOTs to produce contingency plans setting out how they were working with children in the police station, in the community and how they were staying in touch with children in custody. This told us about the processes that had been put in place, with some examples of how practice was being adapted.

During the period the YJB and YOT Managers Cymru (YMC) have met fortnightly to discuss the operation of the system, emerging concerns and to share views on practice. From these discussions it was decided to find out more about some of the good work which has been done. Working with YMC, the YJB contacted all YOTs in Wales and asked them to describe some of their practices. The highlights have been captured in this document.

It is important to stress that although work with children, their families/carers has focused on criminal justice responses and continuing to deliver interventions, the focus on welfare-based work has increased. There have been significant collective efforts by youth justice and children's services to provide support to vulnerable children and families/carers during the period.

YOTs have demonstrated extraordinary flexibility and ability to adapt to change whilst maintaining the integrity of the system. There has been significant support to colleagues within and across local authorities who have been directly affected by the situation e.g. having to shield or with child care responsibilities. What the report does not convey is the passion, commitment and enthusiasm of the people who contributed to this document when telling their stories.

2. Engaging with children, families and partners

Good practice is evident across the length and breadth of Wales. YOTs have had to change their methods of engagement with children and families. They have adapted well by developing innovative and creative ways of communicating, whilst at the same time ensuring their practice is conducted whilst adhering to Covid-19 guidelines to ensure the safety of staff, children and their families/carers.

Maintaining contact

YOTs have been using a variety method for maintaining contact with children and their families/carers. Telephone contact has been one of the main forms used between professionals, children and families/carers. However, there has also been a significant expansion in the use of various forms of social media and video-based technology including Whats App, Face Time, Zoom, E-mail and Skype. Local authorities use different technologies, but all have found ways of maintaining effective communication.

YOTs report that children like the new way of working and some prefer the use of technology. In some instances, this has reduced the likelihood of breach and breach action being taken and improved engagement. Additionally, some parents who were previously disengaged are now much more engaged, sometimes on behalf of their child if the child is not responding well on a particular day. These parents have said that virtual contacts are preferable to them.

There have been several activities to ensure that professionals are able to stay in touch with children and their families/carers:

- Providing them with phones/credit to be able to maintain contact.
- Posting board games and other activities to families to assist them with communication and relationships within the home.
- Arranging online quizzes, debates and group catch ups for children to engage and keep them occupied.
- Setting a challenge *#lockdownchallengecompleteallsix*

'This challenge was created to help maintain engagement with children to prevent disengagement as the lockdown continued. It was also to aid engagement with children families and YOT staff in general through interactive methods'.

Prioritising vulnerable and high-risk children

Most services prioritised the most vulnerable and highest risk children for direct and more regular contact, sometimes with social distancing. YOTs have continued to work with children and their families/carers to ensure they are aware the YOT is 'open for business', that court orders are still in place and it is important to engage with the YOT. However, there has been a significant focus not just on the criminal justice aspects but in ensuring the welfare of children and their families/carers during the period and to help them to understand the lockdown restrictions.

Where children need to be managed through multi-agency arrangements or are a high priority to the YOT, virtual panels and licensing meetings (for children released from custody) have still been held with good engagement from partners. There has been use of three-way case conferences and video calls when jointly working cases with other agencies. Some areas reported improved attendance at risk and planning meetings by partners, notably children services social workers since meetings have been held virtually.

There has been phenomenal support within teams and flexibility to ensure that roles and responsibilities are covered and to support colleagues affected by the situation. In some instances, there has been an improvement in communication, the allocation of resources and care plans being made in partnership resulting in improved clarity and less duplication of effort.

Intensive interventions which in normal circumstances would require the child to have significant levels of engagement with the YOT are taking place through mixed methods e.g. face-to-face meetings, telephone/social media and online sessions. Risk assessment guidelines have been developed to determine whether socially

distanced face-to-face meetings should take place and if so, that it is safe and appropriate.

YOTs and police have been working closely to support children who at risk of being arrested for breaching lockdown rules.

'A YOT police officer in one locality has been involved in preventative work with children across Children's Services who are housed in shared accommodation. The officer has ensured they are aware of the lock down restriction and has conducted friendly informative and informal conversations to assist them to understand what is expected of them'.

There has been an increased welfare response, including regular checks with families/carers and children who are known to be vulnerable and suffering hardship e.g. struggling through loss of income, but too proud to visit food banks. YOTs are often supporting children's services to check on vulnerable families and in some instances, have been delivering food parcels and other necessities to those falling outside of eligibility for free school meals. YOTs have worked with third sector partners, Childrens Services and Education to provide funding for laptops so children can access education, meet professionals and engage in interventions. YOT parenting workers have also connected with the parents/carers of children currently in the youth justice system and some who have left, but are in crisis because of the impact of the lockdown. In some localities, YOT staff have been supporting the Education Hubs for vulnerable learners.

There has been significant collaborative working between YOTs and Children's Services to provide mutual support to children and families:

'Children's Services are working with a child who has been highlighted as 'at risk of exploitation' due to online gaming activity. The child isn't open to the YOT but the YOT has been supporting Children's Services to deliver some interventions to reduce his vulnerability because he is spending more time online'.

There have been several examples of workers going the extra mile. This is just one of them:

'A member of staff from Ceredigion YOT has made 1,700 masks for the community which are all given away free. She has made scrubs for hospitals and scrub bags for paramedics and dentists'.

Delivering Interventions

YOTs have continued to deliver interventions to children despite the challenges. Some examples include:

- Restorative sessions:
 - Carrying out work at home for parents or carers.
 - Painting stones to decorate the gardens of care homes.
 - Being sent seeds and instructions on how to grow potted plants for sharing with care homes and hospitals.

- Building bird boxes at home with instruction via YouTube. The boxes are donated to local care homes.
- Staff have been delivering activities using You Tube videos and other media clips (in a child friendly format) to help children and their families/carers to manage and remain occupied during the lockdown period. Examples include:
 - Assisting children with basic skills and education, helping them with lessons set by the school. In one locality individual learning plans were given to all children to ensure they received resources tailored to their particular needs
 - Supplying children with ingredients and sending them links to cookery classes to assist them with independent living skills. This also provided a meal for the family
 - Guitar lessons
 - Mindfulness and meditation
 - Sessions on specific behavioural issues set by the YOT worker with a follow-up to discuss and clarify understanding
 - A staff member (who is a qualified fitness instructor) pre-recording sessions for children
 - Encouraging exercise

‘Some children are running 5Ks and timing themselves as part of reparation activities. One child has developed and is now aiming to run 20k for charity. A staff member has been ‘training them’ online and is now upset that the children are completing their runs in better times than her! One of the children had never engaged fully and has a history of violent offences. In this case the engagement has been outstanding’.

‘Our reparation worker used her initiative and creativity to ensure reparation hours were completed – especially for those children almost at the end of their order. She established a positive collaboration with Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB). Children created drawings, wrote letters and developed and delivered pamper bags to the NHS workers in ABUHB with support from YOT staff’.

- Some activities have been undertaken with social distancing. This has not just been reserved for children considered the most at risk and/or vulnerable. Contacts have been conducted for a variety of reasons and always adhering to the official guidelines. They have included:
 - Walk and talk sessions
 - Garden or door step catch ups
 - Shopping trips for necessary items
 - Accompanying to medical appointments
- YOTs work with a range of other agencies and individuals in delivering their services. Much of this work is now undertaken virtually, some examples include:

- Enabling victims to take part in restorative processes via video-links.
- Conducting a restorative session in the garden of a residential children's home to prevent a placement breaking down.
- Conducting pre-court diversion Bureau panels with the Police by Skype or telephone to determine outcomes for children and not delay justice.
- Holding Referral Order Panels virtually.
- Undertaking volunteering training and induction online and using this as an opportunity to engage with volunteers who may not previously have been able to complete the training due to other commitments. This has widened the net across the community, giving the YOT a diverse pool of volunteers.

‘Several successful mediation sessions conducted by the reparation worker and the YOT police officer with residential care home staff and resident children. One case was prevented from escalating to the out of court disposal process following a positive restorative circle conducted in the garden with the victim (staff member) and the young person. The outcome was this offence was dealt with using a restorative justice street disposal’.

‘ A session involved a child with diagnosed additional needs and challenging behaviour, who had been removed from the family home during lockdown. The breakdown in placement escalated the child's behaviour in several ways. The two staff who had been conducting the mediation work at the children's home have positively engaged the child through conversation and worked with them and the staff to overcome some of the difficulties’.

‘Staff at independent living accommodations have been good at engaging the children and supporting the work set by the YOT during lockdown’.

- There have been several examples of collaborative working with the Police to develop guidelines to be able to safely work in police stations to support children in that environment. There have been considerable challenges as police interview rooms tend to be small and it is impossible to safely socially distance. The guidelines have helped everyone to understand what is expected to ensure that professionals, children and their families/carers feel safe and confident in the police station.

3. Conclusion

The process of transitioning to recovery has now started and practices remain in line with the official guidance. In terms of the current situation:

- It is likely going forward that YOTs will use a blended of approach of the approaches which have worked well during lockdown and more traditional face to face working, as coronavirus restrictions are eased.

- Work in the police station is being safely conducted, with individuals acting as Appropriate Adults able to attend in person rather than having to carry out this important function virtually.
- Courts are opening up across Wales, including the Youth Court, with increased sittings to clear the backlog of cases.
- In several areas, YOT buildings are being prepared for the return of some workers, provided social distancing can be implemented.

There has been very effective liaison across Wales during the period around the delivery of youth justice. As previously mentioned the YJB and YMC have met fortnightly. In addition, there has been a fortnightly (initially weekly) pan-Wales Covid 19 meeting attended by criminal justice agencies, which has discussed operational issues and their resolution. The Youth Custody Service has held regular meetings for YOTs who have children placed in Parc and Hillside to keep them informed of developments and how the regimes are operating. HMI Probation has started a thematic inspection of YOT practice during Covid which includes Monmouthshire Torfaen YOT, which will add to the existing knowledge base about practice in this period.