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Executive Summary

# Adverse childhood experience (ACE) and trauma-informed approaches in youth justice services in Wales:

An evaluation of the implementation of the  
enhanced case management (ECM) project

The views and experiences  
of children and youth justice workers



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## Adverse childhood experience (ACE) and trauma-informed approaches in youth justice services in Wales:

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# Executive Summary

## Background

Since the youth justice system was established following the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998, one of its challenges has been to find effective responses to prevent children from offending, as a result, a variety of approaches have been taken to achieve this. Historically, some of these approaches have been criticised for being overly punitive, and for focusing too narrowly on criminogenic risk factors rather than placing emphasis on children's vulnerabilities needs, and potentials. Recently, the application of 'Child-First' principles as the foundation of child-focused youth justice practice has gained more momentum, featuring in the Youth Justice Board (YJB) strategic objectives for 2020 to 2021 and the 2019 Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales. Importantly, 'Child-First' allows for a more positive and strengths-based approach, which seeks to divert children away from the formal criminal justice system and to promote individual strengths and positive outcomes. Over the last decade, the increase in diversionary measures in England and Wales has reduced the number of children entering the youth justice system for the first time. This has led to a smaller number of children coming through the system, and a greater concentration of those who present with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma and complex needs. In recognition of the need for new approaches to work with and address the specific needs of children within this group, the YJB Cymru, developed Enhanced Case Management (ECM; see Box 2 in the full report), which was originally delivered in several youth offending teams (YOTs) from 2013 to 2017. Following an evaluation indicating promising results, a second ECM project commenced across YOTs within the South Wales Police Force area.

ECM is a psychology-led approach<sup>1</sup> that uses multi-agency case formulation to understand what has happened to a child alongside their developmental needs, strengths and protective factors. This informs the way practitioners work with and support children to achieve better outcomes and develop their strengths and potential. Building relationships between a child and the adults responsible for providing support is considered as fundamental for giving children the best chance of success. Prior to delivering the ECM approach, YOT workers attended a three-day-training programme, provided by the all Wales Forensic Adolescent Consultation and Treatment Service (FACTS), on ACE- and trauma-informed approaches and to learn how to apply the framework provided by the Trauma Recovery Model (TRM; see Box 3 in the full report).

Bangor University, in association with Public Health Wales, were commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation to assess the implementation of ECM within YOTs. The primary objectives of the evaluation are:

1. To measure change in YOT workers' attitudes towards implementing trauma-informed practice (TIP), from pre- to post-training;
2. To measure change in YOT workers' confidence in working with children who have histories of ACEs and trauma, from pre- to post-training;
3. To develop an understanding of the delivery of ECM as a response to cases where complex welfare issues are evident;
4. To capture the impact of ECM on youth justice processes and practice.

Furthermore, the evaluation sought, where possible, to achieve the following secondary objectives:

5. To explore how an ACE- and trauma-informed approach has been embedded into assessment, planning and supervision of children in YOTs.
6. To develop an understanding of the progress that might occur in children supported through ECM (including perspectives from YOT workers and children).

<sup>1</sup> The input provided to ECM was by clinical psychology.

The evaluation took a mixed methods approach: using surveys to assess objectives one and two; and interviews to assess objectives three to six.

**Surveys.** Fifty-seven surveys were completed by YOT workers from the South Wales Police Force Area, immediately pre- and post-training.

**Interviews.** A total of 24 interviews were completed. Six interviews were completed with children being supported through ECM. Fourteen interviews were completed with YOT workers supporting the delivery of ECM and four interviews with YOT workers who took part in the training, but had not yet made an ECM case referral.

YOT workers were from a range of different roles (e.g. YOT case managers, substance misuse workers, YOT police officers, reparation workers etc.). Senior YOT workers were heads of service and senior practitioners.

## Key findings

### Attitudes related to TIP

- On average, pre-training, YOT workers were more in favour of TIP than they were against TIP for all subscales (see pg. 23 & 24 of the full report). From pre- to post-training, statistically significant increases were seen in YOT workers' favourable attitudes towards:
  - ◆ the notion that problem behaviour is adaptive and changeable rather than fixed and intentional;
  - ◆ the notion that change needs to develop from relationships, flexibility, kindness and safety rather than rules, consequences and accountability;
  - ◆ feeling able to meet the demands of working with children who have experienced trauma rather than feeling unable to meet the demands;
  - ◆ being supportive of and confident about implementing TIP rather than having concerns about implementing TIP;
  - ◆ feeling supported by the organisation to implement TIP rather than feeling unsupported by the organisation.
- YOT workers did not display statistically significant increases in attitudes towards:
  - ◆ empathy-focused staff behaviour, but they remained in favour of this rather than control-focussed staff behaviour.
  - ◆ seeking support for coping with the impact secondary trauma (i.e. trauma experienced by being exposed to traumatic events from the children they work with), but they remained in favour of this rather than coping by ignoring the impact.

### YOT workers confidence working with children who have experienced ACEs

- From pre- to post-training, statistically significant increases were seen in YOT workers' confidence in (see pg. 24 of the full report):
  - ◆ identifying ACEs in children lives;
  - ◆ working with children who have experienced ACEs;
  - ◆ providing intervention for children who have experienced ACEs;
  - ◆ sequencing developmentally sensitive interventions;
  - ◆ adapting their engagement style to meet the needs of individual children.
- Overall, the survey findings suggest that the training increased YOT workers' favourable attitudes and confidence in implementing TIP with children. This highlights the importance of underpinning TIP with training that aims to develop an understanding of the impact of trauma on children and how to apply this learning to practice.



## Improved understanding of children's experiences

YOT workers reported that the multi-agency case formulation was one of the most critical components of the ECM process. The formulation improved information sharing between multiple-agencies, which led to the gathering of more accurate and detailed information on the child's history compared to standard assessment methods (i.e. AssetPlus), which mainly focus on assessing current 'problem' areas in children's lives. The case formulation meeting also allowed for a more comprehensive assessment of the child over a shorter period of time (i.e. within a single meeting), compared to traditional assessment (over a series of meetings), which would not always achieve the same depth of understanding of the child and their needs.



The psychologist's skills and expertise were regarded as being critical in the case formulation for highlighting more nuanced issues and making the links between ACEs, trauma and the child's behaviour. Further, the depth of this information enabled the assessment of children's developmental needs, which led to the coordination of developmentally focussed intervention plans.

## Improved multi-agency collaboration and the use of existing relationships with children

YOT workers reported good attendance of professionals from a range of agencies at the case formulation, which enabled better coordination of support across the YOT and wider services. A coordinated response allowed professionals to utilise existing relationships with the child to deliver interventions, which removed the need for children to have contact with multiple professionals and reduced the duplication of work across services and interventions.

In some YOTs, there were challenges in getting partner agencies to attend the case formulation meetings (e.g. Children's services), which would leave gaps in a child's history and give an incomplete understanding of how to best support them. According to senior YOT workers, this was due to the YOT not providing enough clarity about the ECM approach and what they expected of partners, as well as existing inter-agency problems. Better attendance was reported in YOTs that had fully engaged managers and 'trauma champions'<sup>2</sup> to coordinate meetings and encourage effective partnership working.

## Capturing children's and families' voices in the case formulation

YOT workers expressed that the ECM case formulation could be improved by giving children and their families the opportunity to express their views on the events that have happened in their life. However, concerns were raised that this could re-expose children to traumatic incidents, which has the potential to cause further harm and/or trauma to the child. Therefore, if YOTs were to include children in the case formulation process, the approach taken should be trauma-informed, ensuring that the child has a safe and positive experience.

## Improved identification of appropriate interventions

YOT workers acknowledged that traditional approaches to supporting children in the youth justice system could be ineffective, with multiple interventions imposed on children who are

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<sup>2</sup> The 'trauma champions' were senior practitioners who became experts in the delivery of the ECM approach. They provided advice, guidance and support to ECM case managers to embed trauma-informed approaches in practice.

often experiencing high levels of trauma and living exceptionally chaotic lives (see pg. 25 of the full report for a review of ACEs and complexity within the ECM case referrals). YOT workers repeatedly highlighted that the children they supported in ECM were not developmentally ready to meaningfully engage with interventions that have a cognitive-behavioural underpinning.

The majority of YOT workers suggested that assessing the child's social, emotional and cognitive age in the case formulation (also called developmental mapping) helped them to understand that children were often functioning at an age much younger than their chronological age, which gave rise to significant developmental needs.

### Reduction and simplification of interventions

Children reported that previously, they felt overwhelmed by a multiplicity of interventions, but as a result of ECM, they were in contact with fewer professionals and felt much “better” and “happier” as a result. The TRM was a useful tool to help YOT workers sequence interventions according to the child's needs and what they could realistically engage with. This reduced the number of interventions being delivered at any given time and the number of professionals the child was required to meet. However, YOT workers also reported working with children from any stage of the TRM, in non-sequential fashion, by adapting their interventions to be more suitable for the child. This resulted in cognitively demanding work being delivered in a simpler manner, while building relationships with children.

### ECM and restorative practice

The findings indicate tension regarding restorative justice practice and the way it was incorporated into the delivery of ECM. Several YOT workers reported that restorative justice practice was not always suitable for children who have histories of ACEs and trauma. Others suggested that it could be adapted within ECM, by focusing on building a relationship first and incorporating children's developmental needs, interests and future aspirations into restorative activities.



### Psychology support and ‘trauma champions’ are key for relationship-building

YOT workers reported that they significantly benefitted from the continued support and guidance from the psychologist. The psychologist's input was key for building closer relationships with children. Their support within supervisory sessions was considered to be particularly important when there were crises and significant changes for the child (e.g. being placed into care).

Also, the practice advice from the ‘trauma champion’ enabled improved relationship-building with children. Some YOT workers favoured relationship-based practice advice from the ‘trauma champion’, reserving psychology advice for when they needed additional specialist support.

YOT workers said that the clinical supervision from the psychologist was beneficial for maintaining their own well-being and managing emotions when developing close relationships with children who are extremely vulnerable.

## Increased defensible decision-making and access to services

The psychologist's input to the case formulation added credibility to the ECM practice recommendations. This increased YOT workers' defensible decision-making, providing them with greater discretion to step away from standardised offence-based work to deliver interventions in line with the child's development and interests. It also enabled them to more successfully secure the child's access to appropriate accommodation, placements and adult services such as mental health (for children making transitions).

The formulation report could travel with the child to inform other professionals on the practice recommendations, which was particularly important for retaining a trauma-informed approach when the child moved out of an area or into custody. However, the findings raised questions about what information from the case formulation report the YOT should share with wider services, with the concern that other professionals could misinterpret the information and use it in a way that causes further harm to the child.

## Increased flexibility regarding breach

YOT workers found that consulting with the psychologist when a child had missed more than three appointments increased the flexibility around whether a warning or breach should be issued, taking into account public protection, the child's vulnerabilities and the impact that has on their ability to engage with the YOT and attend appointments.

## YOT workers confidence to deliver the ECM approach

Many YOT workers felt that prior to ECM their professional opinions were not valued across criminal justice and partner organisations. While the integrity of the psychologist's support adds validation to YOT workers' decision-making, it also reinforced workers pre-established perceptions of low credibility from managers and with other agencies, which appeared to create an overreliance on the psychologist to feel confident to implement the ECM approach.

Senior YOT workers raised the need for more emphasis to be placed on the role of the 'trauma champion' to guide and support YOT workers to feel confident in implementing ECM. However, this should be in addition to the psychology aspect because YOT workers stated it would be a "step-back" to lose psychology support. In addition, children would not benefit from the additional oversight the psychologist provided in guiding effective management of cases.

## The importance of meeting children's basic needs

YOT workers suggested that when working with children who have histories of ACEs and trauma, keeping their interactions consistent, predictable and reliable, in addition to meeting children's basic needs, are fundamental principles of practice. They took children out to places where they felt safe and engaged them in activities through which they could bond (e.g. having something to eat together). They emphasised that this was key for building trusted relationships, providing safety and stability, and for increasing engagement from children. Further, children emphasised the importance of YOT workers being reliable, showing genuine care and providing stability, which they had not always had in their lives.

The findings suggest that through ECM, YOT workers were able to identify creative ways to connect with children, which led to the development of closer and more personal relationships. This enabled them to explore the child's personality and identify areas of interest, which led to the child's participation in constructive and meaningful activities (e.g. tailored work experience). As a result,

children said they felt their workers had listened to them, that they were looking out for their best interests and that they had tailored the YOT work around them and what they wanted to do.

Furthermore, YOT workers used their relationship as a vehicle for children to build positive relationships with other professionals and to establish links between the child and the wider community. As a result, children increased their efficacy to reach out to services and seek support on their own volition.

### Engagement with families

The majority of children expressed that their family was the most important factor in their lives. YOT workers used TIP to engage with the family as well as highlighting the child's positive achievements and providing ways for parents and children to positively interact together. They stated that working with families enabled improvement in the child-parent/guardian relationship and increased the level of trust parents placed in the YOT.

### Improvement in children's views of themselves

Children expressed that their YOT workers looked beyond their offending and always had positive things to say about them. YOT workers, challenged children's negative self-views by showing genuine care and providing positive interaction. They said that through ECM, children were beginning to change the negative perception they had of themselves and started recognising and expressing their positive qualities and potentials. They stated that the children demonstrated improved self-esteem and their body language changed from being guarded (e.g. "limited eye contact") to being more open (e.g. "things like taking a hat off in a photograph").

### Improvement in children's emotion regulation

Children said that they greatly benefited from having that "one person" they could talk to, and that talking with their ECM worker had helped to calm them down. YOT workers stated that supporting children with emotional regulation and expression, by providing them with a safe space to talk about their emotions, improved their skills to cope with frustration and navigate stressful situations in a positive way.



### Increased engagement from children in positive activities

Findings from the interviews with children demonstrated that they looked forward to their future and had developed aspirations, including specific career goals they were working towards. YOT workers reported that they were able to re-engage children with sport and reintegrate those out of school back into school and alternative provision. This improved outcomes for some children, including improved school attendance, completion of qualifications, and removal from the child protection register.



## Improvement and challenges in transition processes

As part of ECM, children could continue to engage with YOT workers on a voluntary basis when YOT contact would typically cease. It was emphasised that this benefitted children by enabling them to disengage more naturally from the YOT, as well as allowing YOT workers more time to support children to form new relationships with other professionals. However, YOT workers described challenges in understanding how to manage risk and safeguarding concerns that had arisen during voluntary engagement. Further guidance is needed to provide clarity on roles and responsibilities.



Children reported that the continued voluntary engagement demonstrated care and commitment from their YOT worker. They also said they would prefer more time with their worker, until their life was “on track”.

YOT workers suggested that information from the case formulation report can help prepare adult services (such as probation) to work with the child in an ACE- and trauma-informed way. However, there were some challenges in arranging incremental transitions to the probation officer and less flexibility in the Probation service’s approach to missed appointments, which children were not prepared for. The findings suggest that transition arrangements from youth to adult services could benefit by being more child-friendly and trauma-informed.

## Removing criminogenic stigma

The ECM case formulation reminded YOT workers that the children they work with are children first, in need of care and positive support and should not be characterised by the offences they commit. However, they also reported that further work is needed across the criminal justice system to remove labelling language and to prevent children from being treated as fully responsible adults.

YOT police officers described how the multi-agency case formulation helped them adapt their practice to be more child-friendly and trauma-informed. However, the findings suggest that TIP can be more challenging for YOT police officers to fully implement, because their roles require them to hold people (including children) accountable for their offending behaviour.

## Wider adoption of trauma-informed approaches

YOT workers reported cultural changes within their service, with YOTs working in a more ACE- and trauma-informed way, and placing more emphasis on holistic, child-centred approaches that seek to build relationships. The findings also suggest that taking a trauma-informed perspective can promote a practice culture that endeavours to understand and listen to children in order to meet their specific needs. However, senior YOT workers stated that there is more work to be done to embed trauma-informed and ‘Child-First’ approaches into the youth justice system.

YOT workers felt that to improve the effectiveness of the ECM approach, training on TIP should be delivered to all services to ensure that practice is consistent across all professionals who interact with children who have experienced trauma.

## Conclusion

In the youth justice system, there is increasing recognition among professionals that approaches which focus on managing risk and enforcing punitive consequences often overlook the needs of the child and can be largely ineffective for achieving positive outcomes. However, some YOTs are reshaping how services are delivered to enable a 'Child-First' and trauma-informed approach to be adopted.

The findings of this report have highlighted that in Wales, there has been a shift in youth justice, with an increase in ACE- and trauma-informed awareness and practice. Training on ACE- and trauma-informed approaches and the delivery of ECM have galvanised this shift, allowing some YOTs to move towards a more holistic approach that focuses on understanding what has happened to a child and the complex issues they experience, through which they are able to improve the support they provide to children, to develop their strengths and realise their potential.

The findings demonstrate a number of benefits to the ECM approach, including a more comprehensive understanding of the child, effective collaboration across agencies, the delivery of meaningful and developmentally appropriate interventions and the provision of services that can be hard to secure for some children. Furthermore, ECM enabled YOT workers to take a more considered view of breach, and a more trauma-informed approach to various transition processes.

Overall, both YOT workers and children reported marked progression in positive outcomes as a result of ECM. Children developed positive relationships with their YOT worker and professionals from other agencies, more confidence to reach out to services using their own volition, improved emotional-regulation, greater self-worth and a positive future orientation. However, the findings suggest there is still more to do to embed trauma-informed and 'Child-First' approaches into the youth justice system as a whole.



## Recommendations

### ***The following recommendations should be considered:***

- It is recognised that TIP is in its relative infancy within the youth justice system, and further research is required to build an evidence base on its use and effectiveness.

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- All services dealing with children who have a history of trauma should consider training to improve their understanding of the impact of ACEs and trauma on the child's behaviour. This will allow children's needs to be better understood and a consistent application of approaches across agencies involved with the child and their family.

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- Continuation of work in YOTs to embed trauma-informed approaches to working with children who have a history of ACEs and trauma, and the adoption of relationship-based approaches to meet their needs.

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- Continued engagement with health and psychology services to maintain the added value that the psychology input has on the range of responses the YOT can utilise when working with children who have complex needs.

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- A key role identified in supporting practice change is that of the senior practitioner or 'trauma champion' in YOTs. Further development of this role may increase YOT workers confidence and reduce overreliance on the on the psychologist for validation of their practice.

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- Further emphasis on preparing and helping other services to be part of the multi-agency case formulation, with the aim of improving attendance and participation from partner agencies.

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- Further guidance on what information YOTs can share from the case formulation report with other services to ensure that the information is used appropriately.

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- Increased opportunity for the child's voice to be incorporated in the creation of the case formulation report. The approach taken should be individualised and child-friendly to ensure that children have a safe and positive experience.

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- Consideration of the benefits of continued voluntary engagement with the YOT for children who have complex needs and are involved in various transition processes (e.g. the transition at the end of a court order and from youth to adult services). Voluntary engagement should facilitate gradual disengagement of the child from the YOT, particularly where children have significant relationships with YOT workers and longstanding YOT involvement.

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- Further research is required to build an evidence base on relationship-building interventions to assess 'what works' for children with complex needs. This could be investigated in relation to positive change and could also consider the contribution of the ECM approach.

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