

**A Child First Pathfinder Evaluation - Ceredigion Youth
Justice and Prevention Service:
Towards a Common Preventions Approach Across Wales**



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CEREDIGION
County Council

Acknowledgements

This Pathfinder represents a collaboration between Ceredigion Youth Justice and Prevention Service (YJPS) and Aberystwyth University. The report was compiled by Dr Gareth Norris with service level input from Gethin Jones and John Callow; Gwenann Jones contributed to the design, delivery, and analysis of the survey. We would like to thank all the service managers and practitioners across the 17 Welsh youth offending teams (YOTs) who contributed to the survey alongside the staff of Ceredigion YJPS and wider Ceredigion County Council for the insights into their Prevention programmes. We would also like to express our gratitude to Dr Sue Thomas and Tracey Kinsey from the Youth Justice Board for the support and guidance in delivering the findings of this Pathfinder.

Executive Summary

The aim of this Pathfinder is two-fold; firstly, it will evaluate and report the research undertaken by the Ceredigion YJPS in relation to their suite of 'prevention' assessment, monitoring and intervention programmes. Secondly, it aims to situate these outcomes and processes into a wider picture of how similar Youth Justice prevention approaches could look across Wales as a whole. The report will explicitly examine key aspects of preventative work specifically undertaken in the Youth Justice System in Ceredigion and across Wales more generally, through the analysis of a targeted survey of all 17 Welsh YOTs conducted at the beginning of 2021.

The key findings suggest that there is a wide and diverse approach to prevention work across Wales and that the general ethos of intervening with children 'at risk' of entering the criminal justice system (CJS) as a useful and valued practice despite disparity in caseloads and resources. In particular, the identification of children's increasingly complex needs was common, yet the recognition of community assets was encouraging in terms of addressing local problems. Some disparity also emerged in terms of attitudes towards and measurement of risk and identification of potential prevention input; there was an appetite to incorporate a common reporting and practice initiative across Wales.

The recommendations and conclusion to this report assert that Wales has established a foundation for world-leading work with children in and around the Criminal Justice System; initiatives such as the Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and Child First approach have appropriately shaped this. However, there is some inequality in terms of how these are delivered and a lack of consistency and precision across the 17 YOTs as to how they recognise and respond to these children. The Covid pandemic has had an immediate impact on the work of YOTs and prevention work had and continues to be curtailed; the longer-term outcomes of this will need to be carefully monitored and contingencies explored. The proposals defined here will hopefully go some way to establishing an all-Wales approach to Youth Justice Prevention.

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YOT Prevention Activity in Wales

Introduction and Terms of Reference

The Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales was published in 2018¹ and sets out a vision for the youth justice system in Wales. The Blueprint contains a series of recommendations for YOT targeted prevention work, which included exploring options for:

- Developing effective monitoring of prevention activity to demonstrate impact
- Developing a national approach for targeted YOT prevention activity and ensure it is embedded in a joint framework model for Wales.

The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) commissioned Ceredigion YJPS, working in partnership with Aberystwyth University, to be a pathfinder project to research, develop, and evaluate prevention approaches (across Wales and used in Ceredigion specifically) to inform the development of these recommendations. The YJPS was commissioned based on its experience in developing preventative approaches and in creating the CYSTEM screening tool for prevention cases.

This report contains the findings of a survey of all YOTs in Wales on their prevention activity.

Contributions and Format of the Report

The information documented in this report represents contributions from several key stakeholders, principally Ceredigion YJPS, the YJB, Ceredigion County Council, and the departments of Psychology and Law and Criminology at Aberystwyth University along with the 17 YOTs in Wales.

¹ https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/youth-justice-blueprint_0.pdf

General Background and Existing Research

Prevention

Current definitions of 'Prevention' often differ in the literature and frequently there is some overlap with low-level desistance programmes that target minor offending and anti-social behaviour generally (Mackenzie & Farrington, 2015). For the purposes of this report, we adopt the following definition from the YJB² in relation to prevention:

***Prevention** is support and intervention with children (and their parents/carers) who may be displaying behaviours which may indicate underlying needs or vulnerability. In practice this involves a tiered approach of **early** and **targeted prevention**. The aim being to address unmet needs, safeguard, promote positive outcomes and stop children entering the formal youth justice system.*

This Pathfinder acknowledges that there are often blurred lines in terms of low-level offending, anti-social behaviour and/or concerns over welfare and appropriate behaviour; prevention differs fundamentally from desistance work in that the vast majority of children referred to and/or engaging with prevention programmes have not committed a criminal offence (Klinge, 2018). The recent updates from the YJB refer to these two tiers of prevention work:

1. **Early Prevention** is support for children (with no linked offence) to address unmet needs / welfare concerns, usually delivered by mainstream and voluntary sector services. The Youth Justice Service (YJS) Management Board may have an oversight role in monitoring and advocating on behalf of vulnerable children. YJS's may also share youth justice / adolescent expertise to improve outcomes for children.
2. **Targeted Prevention** is specialist support for children who have had some contact with criminal justice services but are not currently being supported through diversion, an out of court disposal or statutory order (this could include children who have had previous YJS intervention). This is to address unmet needs / welfare concerns. The aim is to improve outcomes through positive interaction while minimising harmful experiences for children.

Recent research by Case and Browning (2021) defines prevention work as 'pre-emptive' as opposed to diversionary; it is the former which we seek to examine in this report.

² https://yjresourcehub.uk/images/YJB/Definitions_for_Prevention_and_Diversion_YJB_2021.pdf

The Youth Justice Blueprint outlines a vision for how children in Wales will be dealt with when they come into contact with the Criminal Justice System³. The system is built around key principles as laid out in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This is to ensure local services are provided to prevent children from offending as well as promoting their future welfare and prosperity. Specifically, there is a desire to create and implement a Whole-system Approach which will focus on prevention alongside pre-court diversion, community, custody and resettlement and transitions:

Prevention Schemes are local partnership approaches developed between services aimed at providing early and/or targeted prevention to support children (and their parents/carers) who may be displaying behaviour associated with offending, antisocial behaviour or vulnerability. Intervention aims to safeguard children and promote positive outcomes to stop them entering the formal youth justice system. This should be provided by the service(s) within the partnership most suitable of meeting children's individual needs.⁴

Additionally, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) puts into place seven core well-being goals, making it a legal obligation that public bodies consider each goal in all its decision-making practices. The goals include: a prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a more equal Wales, a healthier Wales, a Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture, and a globally responsible Wales. To achieve these ends, the underlying principle of sustainable development remains at the core and as a driver to ensure all decisions are made with the well-being of future generations of Wales in mind. Public bodies must make decisions without compromising the good quality of life of future generations, but also consider how to stop problems arising initially (Welsh Government, 2016).

The Youth Justice Blueprint incorporates the principles of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and aligns with one of the objectives of the Act, to modify services to improve outcomes for children, their families, victims and the wider community. In respects to prevention. The Blueprint states that targeted activities in Wales should continue to be prioritised through dedicated funding to prevent children who may not yet have offended from entering the criminal justice system. In order to achieve this, the Youth Justice Blueprint specifically advocates for the development and implementation of processes which will:

1. Align preventative services offered to children (including those targeted at reducing the number of looked after children, the prevention of school exclusions and

³ https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/youth-justice-blueprint_0.pdf

⁴ https://yjresourcehub.uk/images/YJB/Definitions_for_Prevention_and_Diversion_YJB_2021.pdf

homelessness) with a joint framework model and shared risk or intervention trigger factors to improve outcomes for children;

2. Develop effective monitoring of prevention activity to demonstrate impact and to align reporting to Welsh Government, Youth Justice Board and Police and Crime Commissioners where possible.

Additional information on the work undertaken with children can be seen in the UNICEF 'A Rights-Based Analysis of Youth Justice in the United Kingdom' report (UNICEF UK 2020), which highlights many areas of good practice in Wales and across the UK. However, several key areas were identified which limit the ambition to achieve these aims, including:

- The lack of data, knowledge and understanding around the impact of youth diversion on specific groups of children;
- The rise in numbers of permanent school exclusions;
- The lack of robust, publicly available Wales-only (rather than England and Wales) statistical data relating to children's interaction with specific stages of the youth justice system.

Clearly, the ambitions of the legislation have made many inroads into the way the prevention work is recognised, identified, and monitored, yet more clearly demarked processes and evaluation are necessary.

Prevention services in Ceredigion YJPS

Since its inception nearly two decades ago, Ceredigion YJPS has been involved in delivering prevention interventions to children and young people. The aim of these services was to reduce the likelihood of children starting to offend and subsequently becoming involved with the police and criminal justice system, i.e. these services were targeted at children who had not yet formally 'entered' the criminal justice system. Ceredigion CYJPS works with children to tackle family, social, individual, educational, or mental and emotional health related problems, that may arise and subsequently put them at an increased likelihood of offending (and re-offending) and providing support proportionate to their needs. For many children, there is a close link between safety and well-being issues, and likelihood of offending. Activities are structured to address potential offending behaviour directly and also aim to build resilience in children and so reduce the harms they face due to safety and well-being issues. Activity is funded largely by three main partner organisations: the Welsh Government (via the Children and Communities grant), Ceredigion County Council (via the core funding for YJPS) and the Dyfed-Powys Police and Crime Commissioner. Each of the three funding partners contribute roughly equal levels of core funding to the Prevention tier of the service.

Procedurally, children considered to be at risk of offending are referred to the YJPS by several routes, including Police, social workers, schools, family support workers, other professionals and parents. Children and young people can self-refer and around 20% of referrals come via this route. Each child is assessed to establish their risks, strengths and needs. CYJPS support workers then work with the child to develop a support package that may involve one-to-one support, attending one or more structured activity groups and/or attending intensive time limited programmes aimed at addressing specific issues. Where necessary, the children may also be referred on to other agencies and organisations for additional support.

CYSTEM Screening tool

Over the past 15 years, Ceredigion YOT has established a targeted prevention programme seeking to divert children away from the formal justice system, whilst also targeting interventions at those assessed as most likely to offend. Ceredigion YJPS have established links with academic partners, including Aberystwyth University, to examine the correlation between children's needs and offending and the YOT working practices and responses to it.

Through a collaborative research programme, this led to the development of the Ceredigion Youth Screening Tool (CYSTEM), which is used to initially screen children referred to the prevention service in order to ascertain the likelihood of harming themselves and others, vulnerability and potential/actual offending (Norris, Griffith & West, 2018). Where offending and vulnerability risks are low, children are generally referred to group activities and/or signposted on to universal services. Where offending and/or vulnerability risks are assessed as medium, children are allocated a YJPS support worker and undergo a full AssetPlus assessment. All children assessed as being as medium or high risk of offending are offered an individualised intervention plan to address their risk of offending. All interventions at this level are completely voluntary and therefore depend on the child's willingness to engage. Parents and/or carers are also involved as part of the intervention.

Alongside the development and implementation of CYSTEM, Ceredigion YJPS has been evaluating its prevention activity since 2004. Aggregated data for Ceredigion showed a substantial reduction in proven offences from 2004-2018. In addition, the prevention team has gathered data on 708 individuals aged 10 to 17 years referred to the service from 2015 and 2018; results indicated that prevention programmes had a significant impact upon the offending rates of children identified as medium-to-high risk of offending which by age 15 reduced their propensity to offend to below those classified as low risk⁵. Further evidence for the efficacy of the prevention packages indicates over 50% increase in offending over 24

⁵ Griffith, G., Norris, G., and Jones, G. (In preparation). *Engagement and Risk in the Reduction of Proven Offences by Young People*.

months for children assessed as medium-to-high risk who didn't engage with Ceredigion YJPS.

The success of the prevention activity is largely attributable to the holistic approach adopted by Ceredigion YJPS, which includes multi-agency buy-in, bespoke screening tools, high quality and theoretically grounded programmes, and intensive data capture and analysis. The use of CYSTEM as a screening tool has enabled the allocation of resources and supported case worker decision making. CYSTEM is first and foremost a screening tool – as opposed to risk assessment inventory - designed to allocate resources/cases using vulnerability as the background. Essentially, it screens out those low-risk cases, where there was no real need to conduct an AssetPlus assessment on referral, and subsequently very little input is required. The use of CYSTEM in Ceredigion and Dyfed-Powys more widely along with similar approaches and tools in other YOTs in Wales (and England) concords with the wider ethos of prevention activity in that it “[informs] support for children (with no linked offence) to address unmet needs / welfare concerns”.

YOT Survey Findings

Introduction

There is a strong movement in Wales towards gaining prevention activity a national status; recognising this would provide an element of protection for that area of work within YOTs in Wales. The implementation of the Youth Justice Blueprint Whole-system Approach sets out an aim to develop an effective system for monitoring prevention activity to evidence its impact on children as well as aligning all reporting functions to various funding streams such as the Welsh Government and Police and Crime Commissioners (Ministry of Justice & Welsh Government, 2019).⁶

This section outlines the findings of a survey which was conducted with all 17 YOTs in Wales to explore how the main areas of prevention are conducted and how the approach to prevention work is identified and delivered and what interest there would be in adopting a common approach to monitoring YOT prevention activity across Wales. Estimates of the proportion of work are provided and general themes relating to expectations, working with children with complex needs, inputs and providers, and the challenges and benefits of a Wales-wide approach to prevention are explored. The survey allowed some wider appreciation of how YOTs view their work and what the aspirations are for development.

Methodology

The survey instrument (see Appendix 1) was created following discussion with the YJB to ensure alignment to the Blueprint recommendations. The questionnaire was hosted online via the “Survey Monkey” platform. Aside from the name of the YOT, all data was anonymous and nothing in the analysis is attributable to any individual YOT.

A total of 17 responses were received, representing all the YOTs across Wales. Some of the data was more quantitative in nature, for example, estimates of prevention workload, but the nature and ranges of these scores were useful as guides only and no formal statistical analysis was applicable. On the whole, all questions were answered fully and there was a good level of detail provided across the full range of questions.

Analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken using MAXQDA, a data analysis software tool which allows basic thematic and content analysis to be undertaken on the free text survey items. For a general user survey, the data is purposely brief in terms of conducting a full thematic analysis as would be the process for interview data, for example, but across

⁶ Ministry of Justice & Welsh Government (2019)
https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/youth-justice-blueprint_0.pdf

many of the free text questions there was sufficient elaboration to gather these experiences and practices more generally.

Results

The findings are divided into two parts:

- Part one: a summary of the categorical/numerical data;
- Part two: the free-text responses which allowed deeper thematic analysis.

Part 1: The quantitative-numerical questions surveyed responses in terms of general case load, funding and referral sources:

Q3: What percentage of your YOT's caseload are Prevention cases?

The range of responses were from 10-85% which suggests a large disparity across the total caseloads of Welsh YOTs; the median score was approximately 50%⁷. It is clear a large amount of prevention work takes place generally and that even those YOTs where the caseload was smaller, this type of activity was definitely on the agenda. The reasons for the disparity as reported by YOTs are most likely due to the size and complexity of the cohort and funding streams available.

Q4: What percentage of your YOT's caseload are Out of Court disposals?

The range of responses here ranged from 13-80% which again suggests some differences across the case loads of Welsh YOTs; the median score was approximately 35%. As with prevention work, the range of behaviours and community priorities in responding to certain behaviours (e.g. motoring offences, carrying weapons and cannabis possession) may influence the processing of these cases.

Q5: What percentage of your YOT's caseload are Statutory cases?

The range of responses here were from 10-40%, indicating some incongruence across the reported caseloads of Welsh YOTs; the median score was approximately 15%. There is less discretionary decision making in terms of interventions in these cases, but again the cohorts and complexities of the behaviours differ between areas. potentially this could be a result of rural vs. urban environments and the impact of well-established diversionary activity (prevention and pre-court diversion) which may have impacted on statutory caseloads and filtered down to prevention level work.

⁷ The median is estimated as some responses indicated a range (e.g. 15-20%) rather than a specific percentage.

Overall, the estimated average division of workload between Prevention, Out of Court and Statutory cases across YOTs in Wales were proportioned approximately 50% Prevention, 35% Out of Court and 15% Statutory (see Figure 1 below), suggesting that YOT activity is more substantively focused on the front (diversionary) end of the youth justice system than the management of children on community and custodial court orders.

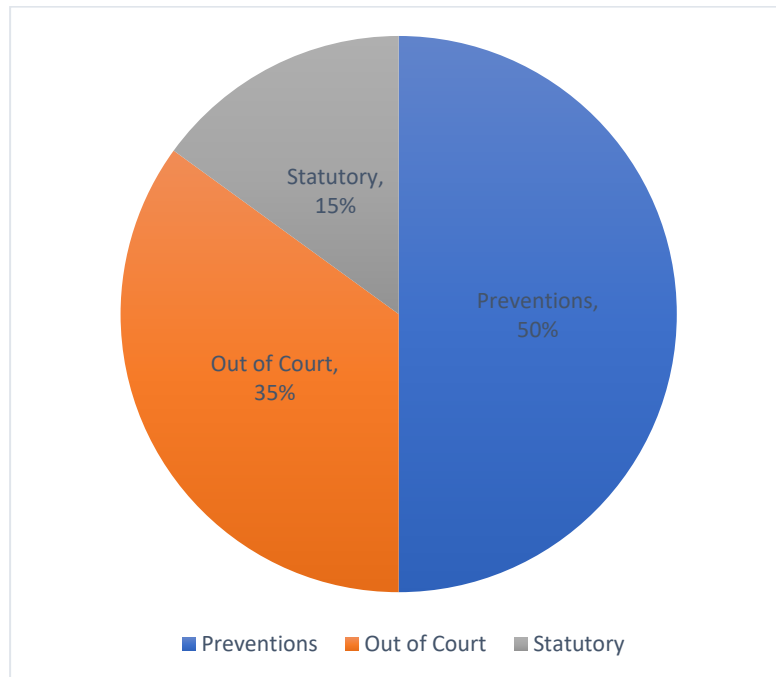


Figure 1: Mean proportions of case load type for all Welsh YOTs.

Q6: How is your prevention service funded?

There were a range of sources of funding which provided the necessary resources including Welsh Government grants, the YJB Grant, Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) grants, YOT Central Partnership funding, and other local *ad hoc* funding. YOTs generally operate with a pooled central budget, which is then allocated across all YOT services; some of the funding streams are for ring-fenced prevention activity. YOTs are required to produce an annual youth justice plan which sets out their funding arrangements and allocation of resources.

Q7: Which agencies are the main ones which refer cases?

Main referrers are Social Services, Police, Children’s Services and Schools; YOTs can also receive referrals from CAMHS, parents, and other agencies, but in actuality these account for a relatively small minority.

Q11: What does your typical preventative input usually involve?

The majority of prevention work (pre-Covid) involved one-to-one work between the case manager and the child. Dependant on the outcome of the assessment and identified need, this can also on occasion involve the child being referred for health-related support or any other specialist support within the YOT and/or the services it engages with, including access to outdoor activities such as “Street Games” and through membership at local clubs, leisure centres and gyms. Signposting and referrals to external agencies are also supported and they complement ongoing YOT support and intervention.

Q12: Who provides the interventions?

Within many YOTs, case managers sometimes oversee the intervention and coordinate support depending on whether it is a prevention, pre-court or court referral. In several YOTs, there were dedicated staff, for example, Prevention and Diversionary Officers (PADO) who directly work with the child, who also have responsibility to case-manage and coordinate interventions for those referred to prevention. Some YOTs have a specific Prevention Coordinator to oversee the structured activity programme(s) aimed at providing consistent, youth work-based interventions, particularly where children may be screened as low-medium risk of entry to the CJS. Wider Youth Support Services such as Youth Workers, Mentors and sessional workers provide intervention at all levels.

Q20: Operationally what would impact most on your prevention activity?

It appeared support for Prevention services is often limited in terms of financial support and resources allocation; increases in targeted prevention referrals and/or any other referrals will ultimately impact on ability to accept prevention referrals. Similarly, any changes in legislation or practice in relation to Out of Court Disposals (OoCD) or Statutory cases that involves increased demand may impact on preventative services if these resources are stretched further without sufficient support.

Q21: Strategically what would impact most on your prevention activity?

Financial constraints were the main barrier to prevention activity and a designated budget to deliver projects and develop service areas. It was felt that longer-term budget commitments from the Welsh Government and YJB would ensure prevention services are funded on a rolling and continuous basis. In addition, prevention services being adopted as a mandatory delivery requirement of YOTs reflected across local and national policy (Welsh Government and YJB) were seen as desirable.

Part 2: Thematic Analysis

The remainder of the findings were largely qualitative in nature and represent a range of responses across the 17 YOTs; the content themes were extracted and summarised as follows (see *Appendix 1* for full questionnaire items):

| Main Theme | Sub-theme |
|---|--|
| Definition of the prevention service | Early Intervention |
| | Anti-Social Behaviour |
| | Family Support |
| | Community Behaviour |
| Typical YOT prevention case | Vulnerability/Harm |
| | Previous Services/Agency Referral |
| | Mental health |
| | Substance Use/Behaviour/Lifestyle |
| YOT expectation upon referral | Child Centred |
| | Risk Assessment – Intervention Plan |
| | Support |
| Gate keeping of referrals | Team/YOT Manager |
| | Risk of offending |
| | Allocation Meeting |
| | Other agency data checking |
| Working with those who haven't offended | Risky behaviours |
| | Stigma/Criminal Justice System |
| | Multi-agency approach and Trauma/Adverse Childhood Experiences |
| Typical preventative input | Assessment/Planning |
| | Signposting/referrals |
| | Group/Community Projects |
| | One-to-one targeted programmes |

Key themes from questionnaire items:

Q1 What is your definition of the prevention service your YOT provides?

One of the key issues in the implementation of prevention work within YOTs has been the broad and diverse nature of the types of interventions and processes which are undertaken; very often these appear to be linked to the size of the cohort and funding opportunities available to deliver services. Hence, the initial scoping of how prevention work maps out across the Welsh YOTs indicates there was a lot of preventative work being undertaken, but this was very different depending on the location and constitution of the cohort.

Themes:

1. Early Intervention

One key aspect of the Ceredigion model has been to provide prevention work at the outset of first referral and the CYSTEM tool was a vital component of identifying vulnerability being experienced by children and young people which could later manifest into criminal behaviour. The evidence here suggests that similar approaches are being adopted across a number of YOTs and there is scope and motivation to identify and work with children identified as likely to come into contact with the service at some point:

“Support and intervention to young people/ parents and carers who have been identified as having potential to offend, need support and are willing and motivated to accept support.” (YOT3)

“The prevention team works with young people who are ‘at risk’ of coming into contact with the justice system because of antisocial and/or offending behaviour. All engagement of young people with the prevention team is voluntary and coincides with wider early help, support and intervention services” (YOT6)

2. Anti-social behaviour

The criminalisation of children has often been at odds with the prevention work being undertaken and the wider ethos of assisting children to avoid coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Many children do not engage in criminal activity until much older and generally they will begin by ‘testing the system’ in displaying behaviour more likely to be considered anti-social. Hence, anti-social behaviour can be used as a flag for later likelihood of referral:

“To assess and identify those young people who are at risk of engaging in antisocial or offending behaviour. To support a child/family to reach their full potential and divert away from behaviours that put them at risk of engaging in or keep them in Youth Justice Services.” (YOT11)

“Prevention/Early Intervention support involves working with partners in the community in delivering initiatives and interventions that focus on supporting children and young people aged between 10 and 17 years who are considered to be at risk of offending and/or may be involved in anti-social behaviour in their communities.” (YOT8)

3. Family Support

The family unit is recognised as important to engage with and in giving consent for YOT involvement to help the child have potential to avoid becoming involved in more serious behaviour. For example, one of the two facets of the prevention screening tool used in Ceredigion (CYSTEM) is the recognition and assessment of vulnerability as a key factor in later likelihood of contact with the YOT. Across the YOTs, there was clearly a significant overlap with individual and familial factors:

“To work with children, young people and their families to address vulnerabilities and the causes of anti-social behaviour and reduce first time offending, prevent further incidents and develop the skills and opportunities to make positive choices.” (YOT1)

“It is essential that for this approach to work as effectively as possible, parents and care givers engage and support this process.” (YOT3)

4. Community Partners

Alongside the cooperation of family members in assessing what preventative support to offer children, the wider community was also a place of support and funding:

“Involve community members in YOS service delivery. Promote local community resources for sustainable outcomes.” (YOT7)

“A multi-agency team of professional staff who work within the Youth Justice System and receive funding from the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, Welsh Assembly Government and local Strategic Partnerships.” (YOT11)

Q2 How would you define a typical prevention case in your YOT?

In a similar way to the prevention work outlined above for Ceredigion, much of this activity had grown organically to cater for individual and community needs, albeit within the remit of the statutory requirements for safeguarding etc. Clearly, there was likely to be no ‘typical’ prevention case in terms of behaviour, but rather the individual background and wider structural issues were more common.

Themes:

1. Vulnerability/Harm

The Child First ethos very much recognised vulnerability to be a major factor in early exhibits of anti-social behaviour in children and young people and many YOTs also identified these factors in their prevention caseloads. In Ceredigion, the identification of vulnerability was a major driver behind the creation and implementation of CYSTEM and associated procedures and processes. Typically, the Tier 1 “Early Prevention’ process was necessary to address ‘problem’ behaviours that were being seen in children but where this had not yet escalated to offending:

“In the majority of the cases the safety and wellbeing concerns are more pronounced than the likelihood of offending” (YOT1)

“targets young people aged 8 to 17 years who are at risk of committing criminal offences but who have not yet been made subject to, or who are not currently subject to, statutory disposals.” (YOT8)

2. Previous Services/Agency Referral

In recognising and assessing vulnerability, it was imperative that consultation and information sharing across partner agencies was necessary; vulnerability was a wider issue that was often exerted *upon* the child or young person:

“We also have the high-risk referrals often received from the Police or the safeguarding HUB requesting a more intensive response to issues such as child exploitation” (YOT15)

“Are known to other services such as Children’s Services, Community Safety Team, CAMHS and Families First etc and displaying behaviours which put them at risk of entering the Youth Justice System” (YOT12)

3. Mental health

The global pandemic has illustrated the importance of mental health as an indicator of problematic behaviours as the stress of isolation and associated lifestyle restrictions took hold. The survey was conducted post-lockdown, but typical cases were characterised by a range of mental health and behavioural problems:

“A typical prevention case is a child who has high complexity factors and lifestyle affected by trauma, attachment, parenting and behavioural difficulties.” (YOT12)

“This means that, very often, by the time a child has reached YOS, negative behaviour patterns have become entrenched and more difficult to address.” (YOT5)

4. Substance Use/Behaviour/Lifestyle

In many of the backgrounds of later adult offending are mental health issues, histories of substance use and poor lifestyle choices, often traceable to trauma; many of these often begin early in adolescence (including Adverse Childhood Experiences) with experimentation and other risky lifestyle choices which can manifest into contact with the criminal justice agencies:

“In many cases, children from primary school onwards, received behaviour support, have gone to secondary school and quickly into Attendance and Wellbeing Service, behaviour support, small exclusions, formal exclusions, smaller timetables, permanent exclusions, PRU etc.” (YOT9)

“potential criminal behaviour by other agencies due to more obvious risky behaviour and the potential that girls are seen more through a trauma lens.” (YOT5)

Q7 What is the expectation of the YOT when a child is referred?

The Child First approach being advocated in Wales through the Blueprint, is child centred and focused, with associated support packages being tailored to assist and nurture the child as opposed to punishment and stigmatisation. Clearly there was a wide range of work being undertaken across Wales in terms of children who had been referred to YOT prevention services.

Themes:

1. Child Centred

Children First, Offenders Second or more simply the Child First policy places the needs and welfare of the child at the centre of the process, particularly in terms of safeguarding and longer-term support:

“That there is a level of understanding in what the Prevention Service can provide to the child and their family.” (YOT5)

“The expectation is for the Prevention Service to empower children and young people to make informed and positive decisions. Therefore, aiding them in desisting from behaving in a manner which increases their likelihood of becoming involved in Crime.” (YOT6)

2. Assessment of needs and vulnerabilities– Intervention Plan

In a similar way to recognising the way in which referrals required input and information sharing in terms of vulnerability, an accurate assessment of the child’s needs and identification of the support and interventions they required was paramount:

“The reason for the referral including a clear outline of the presenting behaviours of concern, what interventions have already or are being delivered by other agencies and an indication of what services/interventions we could provide.” (YOT5)

“That the referral provide accurate and detailed information of the current situation for the child.” (YOT11)

3. Support

The Child First approach and aspects of the Blueprint set out specific requirements or expectations in terms of service provision and the duty of care to children. Many prevention activities are provided ‘in house’ through trained YOT workers, but equally there are a range of third-sector organisations and youth services which are able to deliver bespoke interventions:

“Depending on the assessment, every young person will receive support from the service or signposted to wider youth support services.” (YOT6)

“YOS will undertake a Prevention/Early Intervention assessment to build a child led plan. Any other agencies involved is recorded with their plan of work.” (YOT14)

Q8 - How do you gate keep referrals and decide which cases to accept

Clearly, the assessment and allocation of children to the right support is a key aspect of YOT and prevention initiatives across those surveyed. At the core of Ceredigion’s approach to preventative cases has been the use the CYSTEM screening tool; this has enabled a graduated approach towards the management of the increasingly complex referrals whilst signposting children where there are not significant concerns to appropriate mainstream agencies and universal services as appropriate. Many YOTs took different approaches to gatekeeping from the wider use of screening tools to individual manager decisions:

Themes:

1. Team/YOT Manager

For many of the YOTs, the decision-making process was ultimately the responsibility of an operational manager in the team alongside dedicated staff allocated to specific roles and pathways:

“The Prevention Co-ordinator will also have contacted relevant individuals prior to the meeting so that an informed decision can be made.” (YOT3)

“Operational Manager gate-keeps referral when they arrive.” (YOT5)

2. Likelihood of offending

The CYSTEM screening tool used in Ceredigion utilises vulnerability as a key indicator of potential later involvement with the Service; using this information to allocate resources and monitor progress and problems was seen as an efficient way to deal with these cases:

“Validated a youth screening tool that enables YJPS to target resources (particularly resources dedicated to prevention) more effectively.” (YOT6)

“This screening looks at age at current referral/ASB incident, the seriousness of the incident and whether it involved evidence of alcohol or substance use.” (YOT11)

3. Allocation Meeting

Alongside any use of assessment tools and senior decision making in deciding whether or not to accept a referral, there were also allocation panels which shared information and made this decision:

“Gate keeping and the decision to accept referrals is a team approach done via an allocation meeting.” (YOT1)

“The YOS operates a Prevention Panel weekly to prioritise, gatekeep and monitor ongoing prevention referrals and resources.” (YOT13)

4. Other agency data checking

Accurate and efficient allocation of resources alongside dealing with emergency and complex cases required close working relationships with other agencies, in particular the

police and gathering information from individuals and agencies who have known the child and their family:

“YJS Police officer will complete a front sheet detailing any ASB incidents, CID 16 referrals or any other intelligence relevant to the case.” (YOT4)

“The Prevention Co-ordinator will also have contacted relevant individuals prior to the meeting so that an informed decision can be made.” (YOT11)

Q9 Why should the YOT work with children who have not committed offences

In some respects, the prevention work is at odds with some aspects of the Child First ethos, particularly in relation to how children are to avoid the stigmatisation and wider impact that contact with the Criminal Justice System can have on their lives. However, as in Ceredigion and elsewhere in Wales, many YOTs regarded prevention work as doing just that – keeping children and young people away from the later consequences of developing negative behaviour patterns.

Themes:

1. Risky behaviours

Children will take risks – it is in essence what some aspects of maturity and adolescent development are underpinned by. However, the ability to manage and understand the consequences of these risky behaviours was a major driver behind many of the interventions:

“The ability to identify and work with young people who are at risk of offending provides practitioners with the opportunity of providing support and interventions to prevent offending at the earliest opportunity.” (YOT15)

“These avenues of support can support a young person’s development, maturity and enhance the opportunity of a young person living a crime free life.” (YOT4)

2. Stigma/Criminal Justice System

Criminologists and other social scientists have long debated the impact of labelling on the young person who has become embroiled with in the CJS. However, as mentioned, preventative interventions were seen as pre-emptive in this respect and often aimed to navigate the child into safer and more pro-social behaviour patterns:

“Children who are displaying behaviours that put them at risk of entering Youth Justice Services often show signs of personal stress/trauma which are symptoms of something that has led to their risk of ASB/offending behaviour.” (YOT8)

“Working with young people who haven’t committed offences, assists in preventing them entering the CJ system which can have negative implications for later life.” (YOT7)

3. Multi-agency approach and Trauma/ACEs

Many of the areas under the prevention agenda dealt with complex cases and children and young people with previous/ongoing vulnerabilities, including Adverse Childhood Experiences and trauma. Whilst the prevention work was more aimed at addressing potential future offending, very often the remit was much wider and involved the cooperation and co-working with multiple agencies, beyond information sharing:

“Police based within the team means we have access to intelligence that can be shared to support working with young people to address behaviour of concern as it arises” (YOT2)

“Prevention cases have access the full range of YJS specialisms, which can assist with ETE, Physical / Mental health, accommodation and parenting etc.” (YOT10)

Q10 – What does your typical preventative input usually involve

There was also a wide range of activities that fall under this umbrella, from one-to-one work to group and community projects. In addition, the potential outcomes and expectations when children were dealt with in different ways also varied.

Themes:

Decisions to allocate resources in terms of placing children into specific prevention activity groups and interventions was a key aspect of the YOT case workers role, involving a number of stakeholders:

1. Assessment/Planning

Assessment underpins all activity and decisions relating to the type of intervention required. Obtaining the views of children and their parents/carers in what would work for them was also key:

“Case manager will complete assessment which included completing aspirations and soft outcomes tool. This will inform areas of support and an intervention plan.” (YOT3)

“Parents and carers are involved in the assessment, intervention, planning and review and are encouraged to complete the YJB self-assessment so the work is informed by their views.” (YOT11)

2. Signposting/referrals

For many children not assessed as likely to enter the youth justice system – those which typically characterise prevention populations in youth justice in many Welsh YOTs – there were opportunities to divert them away from youth justice agencies completely, frequently signposting to other support agencies and mainstream services:

“Signposting and referring to external agencies is also supported, but should complement ongoing YJS Support and intervention.” (YOT16)

“Also involve the young person being referred to YJS Health panel for health related support or any other specialist support within the YJS.” (YOT6)

3. Group/Community Projects

The recognition that much ‘pre-offending’ or anti-social behaviour - which is often the reason for a prevention referral and intervention – involves an impact on the community and often provides an opportunity to involve the wider community in the process:

“The majority of our work with young people is delivered within their local communities. This promotes active engagement and investment in communities and is accessible and sustainable beyond our involvement.” (YOT3)

“Also wider support around the child, be that in school, community, home.” (YOT15)

4. One-to-one targeted programmes

There was a large range of programmes on offer generally, but one-to-one interventions were the main way in which children subject to prevention interventions were worked with, including those with lower support needs:

“The majority of Prevention work (pre-covid) involved one to one work between the case manager and the young person.” (YOT4)

“Young people can be referred to group work if deemed appropriate however, in the main it is one to one intervention that is completed.” (YOT5)

Q13 What are the main issues have you experienced when working with the prevention cohort

Just as the volume and range of interventions differed across the YOTs in terms of the prevention activity, so did the variety of issues and factors associated with the children who are referred. Covid is a separate issue to incorporate into these discussions (see further on), but there was a general sense that over the pandemic period prevention cases had become much more complex and expanded way beyond addressing potential offending and anti-social behaviour, and now included a significant element of safeguarding associated with issues such as vulnerability, mental health and trauma.

Themes:

1. Complex – varied well-being and safety issues

The recognition that prevention work extends beyond offending is a major shift in youth justice work generally, even though this has often been at the forefront of the wider ethos of YOTs:

“Prevention cohort can be very complex cases with significant safety and wellbeing issues which oftentimes supersede potential offending.” (YOT15)

“When YJS become involved a number of complex needs become apparent, and earlier intervention could have provided positive outcomes.” (YOT2)

2. Weapons/Knives

Knife crime has become a persistent feature in many discussions about youth crime, particularly in urban environments, and it featured in a number of responses as a factor which was a key issue to address in the ever more complex caseloads:

“Characteristics of the cohorts have changed significantly as highlighted above. There is a strong emergence in relation to groups, gangs, weapons, child exploitation, supply of drugs.” (YOT6)

“Children carrying weapon for 'protection'.” (YOT5)

3. Parents/Family

The role of the family is a key factor in much of the prevention workload; buy-in from close family support networks was seen as vital to the success of any intervention plan, but

equally the issue of consent (as interventions are voluntary) was a factor that could hinder these developments:

"Issue of consent - some children and families refuse a referral for prevention support but are deemed in need of prevention work by partners and community-based referrers."
(YOT11)

"High risk cases still require parental consent and if that is not given they may still not meet the threshold for social work intervention but YJS cannot work on these without consent."
(YOT7)

4. Sexual behaviour and Exploitation

As with knife crime and the carrying of weapons, addressing risky behaviours was becoming all the more common in prevention work. Child sexual activity, which may or may not lead into exploitation or be as a result of it, posed many challenges for prevention programmes:

"The cohort has become more complex, where their behaviour is more risky and equally, they are more vulnerable; this centres around exploitation, weapons and violence." (YOT2)

"Over the past few years, the complexity of the children referred has increased, with much more emphasis on the impact of social media/internet, the sexual exploitation of children, sexualised behaviour, behaviour involving weapons and general aggression towards parents." (YOT9)

Q14 How has Covid impacted on prevention services

The global pandemic has obviously impacted everyone in different ways, but children have been significantly affected and in particular, those with existing and ongoing issues surrounding vulnerability or receiving interventions. The pandemic has limited the scope and availability of support alongside a reduction in cases being referred to YOTs more generally and YOTs having to prioritise cases e.g. focusing on those where there are significant concerns

Themes:

For many children, existing support mechanisms such as school and sports clubs provide a buffer against becoming involved with illicit substances and alcohol:

1. Substance Misuse

The documented increase in adult alcohol use during the pandemic also has links with wider substance misuse and mental health, either the children themselves or their parents/carers:

“Some started to take different substances when supplies were affected. Some young people suffered very traumatic situations with support services diminished.” (YOT5)

“During initial lockdown all but high-risk prevention cases were put on hold due to staff redeployment across the services. Majority of high-risk cases managed during the initial lockdown were domestic violence cases, including child to parent violence.” (YOT6)

2. Less referrals (particularly from Schools)

Many referrals are either received directly or partly coordinated by schools; a lack of contact in terms of identifying and monitoring problematic behaviour meant that children who may have been experiencing problems were not being identified:

“Schools are not necessarily referring as much due to reduced contact with children at school.” (YOT2)

“During the first 6 months of the pandemic, the referrals into the service dropped off; however, since September onwards, there has been a steady flow of referrals again.” (YOT7)

3. Structured and in-person contact limited – home environment

In the early stages of the pandemic, many in-person interventions were curtailed or ceased completely. Clearly, there were many cases of support which still required involvement and risk of harm issues required innovative solutions:

“We have been fortunate to prioritise our cases to ensure a controlled appointment-based system, whilst also using a hybrid approach by utilising technology.” (YOT8)

“Only very high risk and safety and wellbeing cases are currently subject to face to face meetings.” (YOT6)

4. Lack of virtual engagement

The pandemic also highlighted disparities in access to communication technology as well as poverty as factors which inhibited full engagement with services, including school and youth justice prevention work:

“We have found that there are so many barriers to engaging with children on-line, either from an availability of a device, or simply that they do not like/feel comfortable engaging on the phone/social media.” (YOT2)

“difficulties in engaging parents and children in a virtual platform where they do not have the relevant equipment, children with additional learning needs may not also engage well virtually.” (YOT15)

Q15 - What would you like to change in respect to prevention work within Youth Offending Team

Part of the remit of this Pathfinder is to explore ways in which prevention work can be expanded and developed across Wales and presents an opportunity to include innovation based on stakeholder experience and knowledge. The three themes below highlight the main elements the YOT managers regarded as most important in developing prevention services, namely a common language (e.g. definition), consistency and stability, and financial commitments.

Themes:

1. National Prevention Standards/Framework

The disparities in caseloads and general working environments and cohorts across the Welsh YOTs is probably the most robust finding of the survey on a general level. Importantly, this was recognised by many YOT managers and a call for a more consistent set of standards for prevention work and overarching framework was important:

“Appreciate that the National Standard audits are ongoing, but would be useful for a clearer national or regional criteria as to what constitutes a Prevention referral for acceptance.” (YOT8)

“Ongoing development and greater resource and clarity around National Referral Mechanism (NRM), Child exploitation and safeguarding.” (YOT5)

2. Funding for Community/Outreach work

Financial constraints were a consistent theme throughout the survey and the lack of dependable funding streams was seen as a limitation to developing longer-term solutions and stable services:

“Increased capacity to re-engage in more outreach work including 1) working with local police and community safety groups to deliver targeted community/group work in defined ASB/youth crime ‘hotspots’ and 2) delivering community education activities (e.g. Crucial Crew, Peer Education, School Assemblies etc) aimed at raising awareness of prevention opportunities in the authority.” (YOT5)

“Incorporate it as a requirement to provide prevention service across YOTs and secure funding for a longer period to enable longer term development projects to be created and nurtured.” (YOT12)

3. Lack of consistency- funding and staff

The funding limitations were important for staffing in particular, as it could be difficult to retain skilled and knowledgeable personnel and to employ them on a permanent basis as the availability of funding was often determined on an annual basis:

“Core funding, being grant funded for staffing can lead to loss of trained staff. Better recognition of specialism.” (YOT2)

“Funding for preventative services is linked to grant funding which is confirmed on an annual basis. As a result, this creates uncertainty in the workforce with majority of staff being employed on a temporary basis.” (YOT14)

Q16 What type of benefits are there in developing a Wales-wide approach

YOTs in Wales saw a number of benefits in developing a Wales-wide approach to prevention and highlighted consistency in monitoring activity, sharing best practice and the need for a better understanding of the role YOTs played in preventative activity, supported by clear aims and appropriate resources.

Themes:

1. Consistency

Consistency – in terms of standardising responses and developing a common language around prevention – was seen as a key component of the move towards a Wales-wide prevention activity, with opportunities for sharing good practice and effective interventions:

“Reduce different responses [...] Consider implementing shared language/terminology.” (YOT3)

“Consistency that that can be monitored and researched for its effectiveness. There would be benefits to developing a Wales wide monitoring approach of this activity. This would give some consistency with how prevention services are delivered and would identify good practice across the region.” (YOT1)

2. Data

Alongside creating a national framework in terms of programmes, resources and language, developing a common data base was also regarded as an important facet of understanding the importance of YOT activity and of supporting YOTs to develop and deliver services and producing efficiency savings (reducing reporting burdens and having better quality information available) in the YOTs:

“Would assist in developing uniformity if all YOTS were expected to submit same data. Would give Prevention some status and recognise the importance of Prevention services within YOTs.” (YOT2)

“Wales wide monitoring, would be helpful in enabling a national case or bids to be submitted on behalf of YOS linked to the priorities of the Youth Justice Blueprint to support delivery of prevention and diversion activities.” (YOT5)

3. Shared/best practice

The differences in terms of prevention caseloads and the range of interventions creates an opportunity to capitalise on best practice across YOTs and to utilise the access to things such as screening tools, innovative programmes/staff expertise and understanding current and future trends to create a world leading service:

“Greater consistency of approach, sharing good practice and learning, support funding opportunity/ identify gaps in services and ensure the continued prioritisation and resourcing of prevention. Clarity and information around national trends.” (YOT11)

“This would provide a much better picture for the good work that is done across Wales by YOTs and hopefully the effectiveness of prevention work with children and their families.” (YOT12)

4. Understand better the work of YOTs

For many, the prevention work is often seen as a relative luxury, being carefully managed in line with budgets, staffing and complex caseloads. However, the wider remit and

responsibilities of YOTs was seen as less understood beyond many working at an operational level:

“As prevention now makes up large percentages of YOS caseloads, as with OOC, monitoring of performance associated with this activity provides a greater understanding of the work of YOS.” (YOT15)

“This would provide a much better picture for the good work that is done across Wales by YOTs and hopefully the effectiveness of prevention work with children and their families.” (YOT7)

Q17 What type of drawbacks are there in developing a Wales-wide approach

Clearly, the implementation of a Wales-wide approach to prevention work in youth justice does not come without some potential problems. In particular, the geography and population disparity in a country characterised by areas of very high and low population density and a large percentage of rural communities create challenges which would need to be addressed notably in accessing services in less well populated areas which can meet a wide range of needs.

Themes:

1. Local responses

Many smaller communities maybe require a much more focused approach to their prevention work, particularly engagement with local support groups and networks which may be less important in urban locations:

“Loss of local response; YOT areas across Wales are very different so would perhaps not suit a “one size fits all” approach.” (YOT3)

“Overcoming regional expectations and differences might be difficult, however, a shared understanding in Wales would offer consistency and be beneficial to children.” (YOT5)

2. Limiting innovation

One of the drawbacks to creating a standardised approach would be the potential limiting effect upon innovation and progress; hence, responding to local needs and situations was an ongoing concern and necessity:

“The stifling of creativity and difficulty in targeting local needs. It will always have a metropolitan bias.” (YOT12)

“Requires flexibility to ensure that local needs are considered and there can be appropriate and quick responses to local needs.” (YOT2)

3. Geography and caseload diversity

The diversity in culture, demographics, economy and geography that characterises many of the strengths of Wales also presented some issues in association with the duality of rural vs. urban living and the subsequent impact on YOT service provision:

“Wales is a diverse country with both rural and urban populations, some areas have large populations whilst others are small. Youth Justice Services are meant to be delivered to meet local need.” (YOT1)

“Geographical areas, service size and capacity, service needs and priorities. Each local authority has different governance and management boards.” (YOT5)

Q22: Other

Some final comments on the survey revealed general support for the Pathfinder approach and the opportunity to discuss these key issues. In addition, some YOTs were keen to promote their work:

“From [anonymised] perspective we are working with a very diverse group of children and young people with significant risks and need. There has been a significant escalation in severity of incidents resulting in high profile media attention.”

“[anonymised] has created some effective strategies for contacting children and their families at the earliest point in their presentation to Police. Whilst there is a focus on preventing a child from escalating into the Youth Justice Services, there needs to be a measurement of ‘softer’ goals and outcomes that brings resilience into a family/care setting. It should be acknowledged that prevention/early intervention work within Youth Justice Services is fully recognised and that the voice of the child within these services contributes to future service development and delivery. Improved governance and structure of services and data analysis of the cohort needs to be made clearer within the Management Board agenda.”

Summary and Discussion of Key Findings

The survey highlighted that prevention work was both varied and complex across the 17 Welsh YOTs; this is not unexpected given the local demographic, environmental, economic and political disparity that constitutes the Welsh counties generally. Whilst not related explicitly to prevention work, as was earlier highlighted in the review of official documents (including the Youth Justice Blueprint and UNICEF's review of the youth justice system), there was a clear commitment to an inclusive 'child centred' youth justice system in Wales and one which worked towards implementing change and innovation. This was clearly evidenced through initiatives such as the ACE agenda, the development of Enhanced Case Management, and the Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The Youth Justice Blueprint was an aspirational model which outlines the direction of travel for the forthcoming generation of children and young people and beyond. In some ways, many of the YOTs were already implementing these types of practice, and when asked to define prevention, the key themes which emerged were centred around early intervention, anti-social (as opposed to criminal behaviour/criminality), family support and working with community partners. These areas of prevention work – although not exclusive or in their entirety – clearly demonstrate that prevention work is more than addressing criminality; rather, the approach overwhelmingly advocated was one of wider participation in respects to community and family connections, alongside dealing with potentially problematic behaviours early on. There is overwhelming academic evidence to support these general approaches for addressing wider trends in offending at an individual and social level (Evans, et al., 2020).

Typical prevention cases were also firmly entrenched in a set of processes which clearly reflected a commitment to support and guidance rather than the criminalisation of children and young people; the issue of vulnerability and harm reduction was at the core of the prevention agenda. It would appear that the involvement (including referrals) from other agencies was a key feed-in to this process in terms of signposting and/or background/intelligence gathering on children and the activities they engaged in. Surprisingly, there was less reference to criminal behaviour as being a major factor, and the main themes of mental health and substance abuse alongside more general concerns over risky behaviours and lifestyle choices were apparent. The capacity to deal with this ever-changing cohort and sets of behaviours, however, did pose a challenge, both in terms of funding and staffing and also the changing landscape of working with vulnerable children. Prevention cases were reported to be more complex with safety, well-being and vulnerability often featuring as a result of children being affected by trauma, attachment, parenting and behavioural difficulties; these difficulties were sometimes acute and on-going. Exploitation from gang associations and activities (carrying weapons, supplying drugs etc) as well as sexual and other forms of exploitation and sexualised behaviour. YOTs saw their role as helping to navigate children into safer lifestyles.

Operationally, there were several important metrics which emerged from the data. At a basic quantitative level, it is clear that prevention workloads vary considerably across the cohort; these ranged from 10-85% but could be grouped into 10-20%, 40-60% and 75-85% generally. It should be noted the YJB conducted a similar survey in May 2021 to establish what proportion of cases were prevention⁸. These findings suggested that the average YOT caseload in Wales for prevention and diversion work was 72% (based on a response from 11/17 YOTs), and also noted to be higher than in England (52%), the difference potentially attributed to Welsh Government funding. It also noted – as we have found here - wide variations between YOTs with a range of 6% to 85%; reasons for this difference should be established more clearly as the workloads appear to be very different across the regions. There was less disparity reported across out of court disposals and statutory caseloads, but again wide variation. There is some discussion of how rural vs. urban differences might impact upon an all-Wales approach, but generally there is a wide range of feedback which requires further investigation. It may be that caseloads are larger in some areas, that the cohorts of children referred have diverse characteristics; similarly, funding for the activity and the resources available are also different, influencing the capacity to provide prevention services and the type of support provided e.g. the systems and processes in place to signpost children and young people to other agencies or YOTs provide specific preventative interventions, etc. Also, the role of the third sector and Youth Service may be important in terms of what they can provide locally.

Additionally, length of involvement with YOT prevention services were less divergent and although many reported that these were case specific, the overall contact time appeared to be between three to six months. The main prevention input ranged from an initial assessment of need and signposting through to targeted on-to-one interventions and group work in the community. Overall, it seemed that the prevention demand is high and persistent over time across Wales. The relationship between what happens at the prevention stage and subsequently in later encounters with the CJS is important to note in terms of monitoring which children come into the system and through what route and whether prevention activity genuinely stops the onset of offending behaviour.

⁸ <https://yjresourcehub.uk/wider-research/item/889-prevention-and-diversion-scoping-survey-summary-youth-justice-board-june-2021.html>

The Covid Pandemic

COVID-19 undoubtedly brings new challenges to the working practices of YOTs both in the immediate and potentially longer-term impact when realised. There are some areas of interest that emerged here, for example, YOTs having to maintain contact with children through virtual means - not all families having access to technology and children not always engaging well through virtual voluntary contact. This clearly limits the scope of case managers to effectively work with children, particularly those where there are significant concerns. With the curtailment of most structured and in-person activities, the breadth of contact with the prevention cohort overall was limited. HMIP's inspection of YOT Covid activity⁹ also noted that YOTs had prioritised children on statutory orders during the most restrictive periods, with prevention cases receiving significantly less priority.

The closure of schools and limited involvement with children and young people generally in educational settings also led to reductions in the number of referrals received; along with the police and social/children's services, educational providers were a main source of referrals. Issues surrounding children having less visibility to mainstream services (including schools and health care) and increased substance misuse were of concern and likely to have later ramifications once Covid restrictions are lifted and the potential longer-term ramifications are evaluated. Whilst cycles of pathology are already endemic amongst many deprived communities, the pandemic has highlighted also the extent of these disparities, particularly minority groups, and intervening in the added pressures from the pandemic is vital. The evidence from major natural disasters (see McDermot, et al., 2010), suggests that families with low resilience and previous exposure to mental health problems are likely to suffer disproportionately to these unfavourable environments.

Prevention work was well-established prior to Covid and represents best practices in terms of assessment, monitoring and responding to child welfare and rights, the pandemic will undoubtedly bring new challenges in the short-to-medium term and possibly longer. Prevention work will become even more important in tackling issues around youth engagement in school (including exclusions), general well-being and physical and mental health, safeguarding and vulnerability, as well as increased potential for anti-social and criminal behaviour. As restrictions are lifted, re-engaging with children at risk of harm will be a priority alongside identifying new cohorts of potentially vulnerable children who require support.

⁹ <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/11/201110-A-thematic-review-of-the-work-of-youth-offending-services-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

Recommendations

1. National strategy/framework for prevention activity

The findings of the YOT Survey indicate that there is a wide-range of practices which are conducted by YOTs in Wales as part of 'Prevention' activities, including wider assessment and out-of-court disposals. The latter was not within the remit of this study, but links between prevention and out of court activity should not be ignored and should form part of a national strategy. This study has focused on prevention, and as has also been indicated in the findings gaining a common understanding of what this means (and its distinction from pre-court diversion and the use of out of court disposals) is important in helping agencies to understand what YOTs do and the role they play in targeted work with children to prevent later contact with the CJS.

Importantly, there appeared to be some appetite for a universal framework for prevention work and a commitment to sharing data and best practice. However, there were some reservations as to how the process might work in practical terms in the light of disparity between rural and urban areas which characterise the diversity of population demographics across Wales. Similarly, some capacity to respond to local issues was desirable and YOTs need to understand the profile of the cohort of children they are working with (which can change) to ensure local needs are met. Overall, the YOTs responded positively to the notion of pooling resources and having access to a broader suite of evidence-based interventions, supporting the wider notion that the prevention work was a key area of the role they played in the lives and well-being of children.

2. A common means of data collection

Data recording and standardisation is an important aspect of assessing and reviewing the processes of the criminal justice system and exists in all other aspects of the system, but to a lesser extent prevention activity. As a result, a significant aspect of YOT work is not captured or reported on. There is a strong movement in Wales towards giving prevention activity a national status in order for it to be recognised and providing an element of protection for that area of work within YOTs in Wales. Developing a common means of collecting data on referrals, the progress of cases and outcomes to establish baseline activity, monitor progress and develop an evidence base in respect of targeted YOT prevention activity; ultimately this would enable a Wales-wide picture to be produced as well as data capture for local funders and ascertain why there are local and regional differences in caseloads and cohorts. The survey findings indicate that there is some appetite for this, but it needs further exploration and development. It was felt that in some areas there was a lack of wider understanding and appreciation of what prevention did and what it aimed to achieve, which this could help to address.

One of the challenges is whether and how prevention activity can be effectively monitored, and a Wales-wide approach taken. Ceredigion YJPS has trialled an effective reporting tool that identifies children 'at risk' who have been referred to its prevention service. This has been expanded with the support of the Dyfed Powys Police & Crime Commissioner's Prevention funding grant. This enabled the YOTs in Dyfed Powys (Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire and Powys) to develop a common approach to monitoring prevention activity within the region in the last four years using a set of variables to establish the impact of Prevention work. One of the main objectives of the funding from the Police & Crime Commissioner was to develop a consistent reporting method across the region to capture Prevention activity with 6 principle aims:

1. To ensure a multi-agency partnership approach is taken to delivery diversionary activities to children to reduce offending and re-offending behaviours;
2. To achieve a reduction in offending by children and reduce the likelihood of Adverse Childhood Experiences through involvement with the youth justice system;
3. To engage with children most at risk of offending and ensure they have support accessing additional services, from substance misuse to housing, education and employment;
4. Support children to explore issues around actions and the consequences of these actions;
5. Reduce the number of children with behaviours which challenge being referred on to Tier 3 and 4 services;
6. Focussed approach to activities which enhance personal development skills, confidence and self-esteem and promote engagement in education, training and employment opportunities.

In line with these key objectives Dyfed Powys YOTs have established an integrated approach to establish whether Prevention work has any effect on offending and re-offending rates in Youth Justice cohorts. Using this type of reporting mechanism has been an effective method of monitoring Prevention activity.

Consideration should be given to whether the methodology adopted in Dyfed Powys could be incorporated into YOT case management systems, which would enable standardised (and comparable) reporting, the tracking of children (if they entered the system) and comprehensive information for funders and other interested parties, management oversight and effective quality assurance in delivering a good quality service to children, young people and protecting communities safe from harm. An option would be to explore whether this would work on a Wales-wide basis. Having a unified Welsh approach towards using validated and accredited screening tools and gathering relevant data would be an effective way forward in meeting one of the objectives of them Youth Justice Blueprint.

3. Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma

There has been growing interest in ACEs and the impact of trauma for some time and is clearly reflected in the YJ Blueprint. Understanding the extent and prevalence of ACEs in the prevention cohort could transform the impact on service delivery and whether appropriate support and services are available for these children. The Blueprint highlights the: “[need to take] a trauma-informed approach throughout the various stages of the youth justice system, from prevention and early intervention to resettlement from custody, recognising and responding to ACEs and indicators of complex need.” However, these aspirations need to recognise the practicalities involved in: “[embedding] trauma-informed approaches into community and custodial practice to effect cultural and systemic change and deliver consistent approaches in meeting children’s needs”. There are also different considerations when working with children through prevention activity (voluntary engagement) and those on statutory orders (compulsory engagement).

Assessing children’s needs in relation to ACEs needs care to avoid stigmatisation. The presence of four ACEs or more does not indicate the inevitability of the child experiencing problems, it is merely an indicator of the type of adversity they have faced. Current practices seemingly pit against each other the risk-based approach – albeit with revised context – of the AssetPlus inventory, with the more nuanced and child-centred approach advocated as part of the ACEs agenda. Although not incompatible, the two were not developed in tandem and seldom sit comfortably together. The Blueprint’s development of trauma-informed practice needs to tread a fine line between the two and should consider how ACE and trauma identification is developed to support children involved in preventative services.

Conclusion - towards an all-Wales prevention landscape

The two key aims of this Pathfinder were, firstly, to report on the Ceredigion 'model' developed for integrating prevention work within the YOT, and, secondly, to ascertain areas of commonality and potential for development across Wales. The key message was that the survey was well received and relayed a commitment towards prevention work across the country as a whole. Naturally, there were a number of areas where disparity in caseloads and activity emerged; these represent the challenges to implementing a national approach to prevention work. However, the approach developed in Ceredigion over the last 10-15 years has demonstrated a progressive move towards recognising the vulnerability and safeguarding of children who often become known to the YOT through referral processes such as schools and the police. The following quote from one of the YOT survey responses, summarises the key messages from this report and the direction with which the prevention agenda should strive towards across Wales as a whole:

"The [anonymised] Youth Justice Service has been completely reorganised in the last year. We now fully promote the preventative agenda to give our children the best opportunities and outcomes to live a safer and happier life away from crime and exploitation and support their families to live safely in their communities. We also support the victims of crime and work restoratively with child who offend to try and help them understand the impact and consequences of their crime by helping the to empathize with their victims. We work on a child first, offender second basis and see all children of a victim of their own circumstances and we never give up!"

In conclusion, the overriding message must be that the prevention agenda is a key feature in the Welsh context and a wide range of evidence supports its value in the lives of children on the fringes of involvement in the CJS.

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Appendix 1 – Pathfinder YOT User Survey

Pathfinder Survey

Name of YOT:

Name and designation of the person returning the survey:

For the purposes of this survey, we are defining preventative services as those which provide support to children at risk of entering the youth justice system. Within this definition it could include:

- a) Children who have not offended but whose behaviour because suggests the might in the future
- b) Children who have come to the attention of authorities for anti-social behaviour
- c) Children who have offended but have been diverted from court with a non-criminal disposal, youth caution or conditional caution

The survey is not intended to cover services provided to children on statutory court orders.

1. What is your definition of the prevention service your YOT provides?
2. How would you define a typical Prevention Case in your YOT (what type of characteristics, needs etc)?
3. What percentage of your YOT's caseload are:
 - a. Prevention cases
 - b. Out of court disposals
 - c. Statutory cases
4. How is your prevention service funded?
5. Which agencies are the main ones which refer cases to the YOT (e.g. police schools, children's services, education etc)
6. What is the expectation of the YOT when a child is referred?
7. How do you gatekeep referrals and decide which cases to accept?
8. Why should the YOT work with children who have not committed offences?
9. What does your typical Preventative input usually involve? Signpost to mainstream services, One to one generic work. One to one specific targeted work/ Group work specific/ Group work Generic.
10. Who provides the interventions?
11. What is typically the length of involvement with a prevention case - One week intensive/Prolonged over several weeks/Once a week term time only/ other.....
12. What are the main issues have you experienced when working with the Prevention cohort (e.g. have the characteristics of the cohort changed at all?)
13. How has Covid impacted on prevention services? (e.g. children's needs, delivery and priority of service delivery etc)
14. What would you like to change in respect to Prevention work within Youth Offending Teams?

15. What type of benefits are there in developing a Wales-wide approach to monitoring YOT prevention activity?
16. What type of drawbacks are there in developing a Wales-wide approach to monitoring YOT prevention activity?
17. Why is it important for YOT involvement in preventative activity to be recognised?
18. Operationally what would impact most on your prevention activity?
19. Strategically what would impact most on your prevention activity?
20. Anything else you want to add