Participation strategy

Giving young people a voice in youth justice
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Listening to children and young people in the youth justice system: our vision

The Youth Justice Board’s (YJB) vision is that every child and young person lives a safe and crime-free life, and makes a positive contribution to society.

We believe that all children and young people in the youth justice system should have:

- the opportunity to get involved in decisions about their care and supervision
- access to the services they need
- a say in how those services work.

Approaches to preventing crime and addressing the needs and concerns of victims are more likely to be effective if they are informed by and co-designed with young people.

Engaging with and listening to children and young people is essential in achieving these aims and should be at the heart of service design and delivery.

The YJB will work towards our vision by:

- embedding young people's participation in how we support, advise and monitor the youth justice system
- helping government and our strategic partners when they make decisions - to take more notice of young people’s voices
- giving young people a say in how we plan, deliver and evaluate our own activities.
Our approach to participation

“Participation means that it is my right to be involved in making decisions, planning and reviewing any action that might affect me. Having a voice, having a choice.”

For children and young people, participation is an active informed and voluntary process where they are able to express views and make decisions on issues that affect them. This can range from them giving opinions on a particular issue, (consulted and informed) to choosing their own agenda and taking their own approach (child initiated and directed). Participation can also be described as co-design, co-production or shared decision making – but at its heart it means work with and by young people, not merely work for them.

We believe that a shift towards working with young people, and valuing them as assets: as citizens, advisors, colleagues and stakeholders is crucial if youth justice is to be truly effective.

We agree with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention for Rights of the Child which states that:

“Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.”

Put in a more straightforward way, this means that:

“Children have the right to say what they think should happen, when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account.”

To be able to participate, young people need to be empowered. This involves supporting the development of skills such as working in a group, public speaking, and confidence to be able to communicate and interact with a range of stakeholders. The process of participation and empowerment is not about young people doing things just because adults tell them to. Instead, participation should cultivate opportunities to develop new skills and abilities through shared respect and understanding between people of all ages and backgrounds.

1 The Welsh Government ran a competition to explain what Participation means in a way that would be easy to understand for adults and young people. This was the winning ‘sound-bite’ from a young person.

2 The full text of the UNCRC can be found here: http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf

3 A child-friendly leaflet summarising the UNCRC can be found here: http://www.uncrcletsgetitright.co.uk/index.php/right/file
Standards for Participation
Like most organisations that want to get better at listening to the voices of young people, we will try to follow standards for participation practice. Separate participation standards have been developed for England and Wales. As the YJB covers both countries we would not be able to adopt one or the other, we have identified the core principles of both that will underpin the spirit of our work around participation. These are:

1. **Voluntary** participation must be voluntary and children and young people should have enough information and time to make informed decisions.

2. **Inclusive** every child and young person, no matter what their race, religion, gender or background has the same chance to participate in a way that they are comfortable with and that they understand.

3. **Young people’s voices are to be heard and respected** – young people’s views will be taken seriously and listened to.

4. **Young people will get something out of it** – activities should be interesting, enjoyable and young people should learn something from the experience.

5. **We will let young people know what has happened** – young people will be told what difference their involvement has had. Time will also be taken to explain why some suggestions could not be acted on.

6. **Improving services** – young people’s views should be used to improve services and achieve better outcomes for them and their communities.

Participation with young people in the youth justice system
There are a number of things that need to be kept in mind when engaging with young people in the youth justice system. This can be a challenge but we believe that together we can find solutions. The kinds of difficulties young people can come across and potential solutions include:

- **Young people may have experienced difficulties in their lives and may therefore lack the confidence to take part in participation** – we can treat each young person as an individual and take the time needed to understand their particular circumstances, changing how we respond to them to take this into account.

- **They may have problems in communicating** – we can adapt sessions to take into consideration young people’s speech language and communication skills; using pictures and child friendly language, for example.

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5 Further reading about participation practice with young people in the youth justice system can be found in a joint YJB and NACRO Cymru publication here: [http://bit.ly/participationwales2b3Zgtf](http://bit.ly/participationwales2b3Zgtf)
- They may be less motivated if their views have not been taken into account in the past – we will always make sure we give young people feedback when we ask them their opinions. Especially when we aren’t able to do something.

- They may mistrust the intentions of adults – we will try to make sure that young people are fully aware of the purpose of any activity. When possible, we will try to have participation activities led by young people.

- Young people sometimes find it difficult to attend – this is less of a challenge for young people in the secure estate however we will plan to engage with as wide a range of young people as possible and, where appropriate, offer support and incentives for young people to attend.

- Allowing all young people to engage and have an equal voice – group sessions with people of any age can often be dominated by one or two assertive individuals or by people from certain backgrounds, so we will make sure all young people get the chance to be involved. This is particularly important as there are groups, like young people from Black and other minority ethnic backgrounds, or those who have been in care, that are over-represented in the youth justice system.

- Being sentenced by a court necessarily removes some choices – although this is the case, especially for those in custody, best practice shows that young people can be included in many decisions about how services engage with them on a sentence and how they can make the best of their time in the youth justice system.

- Being open to negotiation and compromise – It is important to discuss, agree and explain how some areas of work in the youth justice system are best led by an adult while others should be guided by the young person. This is a powerful way to improve engagement and strike a balance between the needs of the organisation and the young person.
Why we should listen to young people in the youth justice system

As well as being set out in international and domestic law, like the UNCRC, the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Children Act 2004, there are other, much better, reasons for focussing on participation in youth justice.

We believe there are real and practical benefits if we listen to children and young people’s views and experiences of their time in the youth justice system.

Evidence suggests that young people who are involved in the planning and structuring of their interventions are more likely to engage in services and that positive gains are made in relation to behaviour, respect and confidence. Very often areas for improvement are identified after organisations have sought the views of young people engaged in their services.

So, as well as supporting our vision for the youth justice system, better participation practice will also help us with our mission to:

- Develop and champion a child-centred and distinct youth justice system.
- Develop a ‘centre of excellence approach’ in youth justice.
- Drive continuous performance improvement in youth justice services.

The potential benefits to the youth justice sector include:

- Services and policies designed, delivered and evaluated based on identified needs of children, young people and their families.
- Reminding policy makers, board members and senior managers what it is like to work with or be a young person so they can make decisions with that in mind.
- Improved behaviour within the community and the secure estate.
- Enhanced relationships between staff and young people, reducing violence and improving compliance in the secure estate.
- Better targeting of resources and more effective services leading to improved outcomes such as reduced reoffending.
- Better safeguarding in the community and secure estate.
- Better quality and more inclusive decision-making.

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As well as the benefits for the system, more importantly there are wider benefits for young people in the youth justice system. These could include:

- Feeling more respected and listened to, and learning to listen respectfully to others.
- Having more self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Being part of the planning of interventions and becoming more motivated to engage and more likely to succeed.
- Gaining new skills - like problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation, listening and communication.
- Learn about their rights so they are more likely to understand and respect the rights of others.
- Feeling more involved in group and democratic processes, and have a better understanding of the society in which they live.
Our participation priorities

In time, we want every aspect of our work to be an opportunity for us to consider the voices of young people. To make a start, our Board has identified the following areas of work as our priorities:

- Monitoring and supporting youth justice services in the community and secure estate and safeguarding young people.
- Including the voices of young people in our communications to youth justice services, government and young people themselves.
- Effective Practice and the development of a centre of excellence.
- Commissioning services.
- Making a space for young people in governance and decision making.

To do this, we will engage with young people from a range of backgrounds in the following ways:

**Directly**
- With those in secure estate because they are potentially most vulnerable but also because they are our service users - by virtue of our duty to place them in custody.
- With young adults who have experienced the Youth Justice System to help us with our governance and decision making.

**Indirectly**
- With young people who have experienced custody, in community justice and prevention – for example through feedback from youth justice services, surveys, and inspection results.

**Occasionally**
- With all young people - including those who have never offended or who are victims of crime - through focus groups or surveys.
Where are we now?

We carried out a self-assessment of what participation activity we already do. Below are some examples of the areas where we found that participation is currently being used in the YJB.

**Monitoring and supporting community and secure youth justice services**
- We commission and use surveys from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons to find out how safe and respected young people in the secure estate feel. This helps us hold providers to account.
- YJB Cymru always interviews young people as the first stage of any youth justice service improvement work.

**Communicating with government, the sector and young people**
- Young people are represented at and help run our annual Youth Justice Convention. This includes us inviting three young people to co-chair the 2016 event.
- Young people were involved in the development of our Resource Hub, which is the main channel we have for communication with youth justice services.
- We conducted an online survey with young people to feed their views into Charlie Taylor’s recent youth justice review.

**Effective Practice and the development of a centre of excellence**
- In a number of our recently commissioned pieces of research we insisted that the specification included a requirement to interview young people to get their views.
- Some of our online courses, which are an important part of the Resource Hub, involved young people in their development.
- AssetPlus, the new youth justice assessment framework, has been designed to help those working in youth justice take more account of young people’s views in the way they work.

**Commissioning services**
- Focus groups of young people help us develop specifications for new services and play a part in the evaluation of bids.
- When we make decisions to decommission custodial places we ask advocates to gather the views of young people on which establishments they prefer.
- We facilitate exit interviews with young people leaving custody.
Governance and decision making

- We held seven in-depth focus groups with young people in the care of secure and community youth justice services as well as young victims of crime to help shape our latest corporate and business plan.

We included young people on the panels that recruit our executive staff and arranged work placements for young people with experience of the youth justice system.

We were pleased to find that in many priority areas quite a lot is already being done around participation and there was some effective work being carried out. However, it would be fair to say that this was happening on an ad hoc basis and not fully embedded, with some identified gaps in certain service areas.

Conversations with key personnel in each of the priority areas highlighted that approaches to participation vary and are not well coordinated across the organisation. In fact, sometimes staff weren’t aware that what they were doing was, in fact, participation-based.

Nevertheless, a common theme was a commitment to embed participation throughout all priority areas and a willingness to better understand participative approaches and use the views and experiences of young people to make a better youth justice system.

Clearly, more work is needed to raise the profile of participation and the clear benefits of involving children, young people and their families in our decision-making processes; which is what this strategy is all about.
How we will achieve our vision

The following tables set out our action plan for delivering this participation strategy. These are the practical ways we will start to make sure the voices of young people are listened to and taken account of in our work.

### Monitoring and supporting community and secure youth justice services

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<tr>
<th>Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>Implement a rights-based approach to monitoring in the secure estate which uses participation and advocacy to keep young people safe and included.</td>
<td>March 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Put in place formal ways to make sure young peoples’ voices are heard, with a charter to set out how this works.</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change and improve how young people experience induction to the secure estate to help them understand their rights.</td>
<td>March 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve how we use the young people’s feedback from HMI Prisons inspections.</td>
<td>From now on</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make sure all of our improvement and support work with youth offending teams includes engagement with young people in that service.</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve information systems in the secure estate to make engagement with young people normal practice when decisions are made that affect them.</td>
<td>March 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td>Call for all youth justice services to have a named champion for the voice of the young person.</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
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### Communicating with government, the sector and young people

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<tr>
<td>When our staff and Board members talk to young people, we will make sure they ask them how they feel about the youth justice system and how they think it could be made better.</td>
<td>January 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Include a specific section for young people’s views on any advice we give to government ministers.</td>
<td>September 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>When we write guidance for youth justice services, make sure there is also an understandable explanation for young people who will be affected.</td>
<td>From now on</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have pages on our Youth Justice Resource Hub for young</td>
<td>September</td>
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people to find out about the youth justice system. 2017

Effective Practice and the development of a centre of excellence

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<tr>
<td>Make sure young people are involved when we review AssetPlus after implementation.</td>
<td>March 2019</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make sure we always ask those who carry out research on youth justice to interview and consult with young people as part of their work.</td>
<td>March 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage our academic partners to listen to young people when they decide on their research priorities.</td>
<td>March 2017</td>
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Commissioning services

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<tr>
<td>Consult with young people on the services they need when they are in custody and make sure the people that plan and pay for it listen to their views.</td>
<td>From now on</td>
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<tr>
<td>When we commission services that impact on young people’s experience of the community or secure youth justice system, make sure young people help us design the specification.</td>
<td>From now on</td>
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Governance and decision making

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<td>Make sure young people are part of the Board’s decision making – starting with the appointment of a young person to the Wales Youth Justice Advisory Panel.</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>All our papers for the Board and the Executive Management Group will include a section asking the person that wrote them to show how they have taken the views of young people into account.</td>
<td>June 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Board Members and Executive Management Group members will have training on participation and engagement with young people.</td>
<td>August 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Board will make sure that there is an annual report on how we have performed against this strategy and listened to the voices of children and young people</td>
<td>November 2017</td>
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Knowing how we’ve done

We want to be sure we know when and how well we have achieved our action plan and vision for participation in the YJB.

We’ll do this by keeping track of the benefits realised through participative practices in our day-to-day activities and the projects we deliver. We will check this is happening by asking our senior managers for reports that will be presented to our Executive Management Group and the full Board every six months.

We will also review our progress on an annual basis and publish this in a public report on our Youth Justice Resource Hub.