

Towards a Youth Crime Prevention Strategy

NCH the children's charity

NCH welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Youth Justice Board's draft youth crime prevention strategy. We are keen to contribute our views to shaping the final version of the strategy and see this response as part of an on-going dialogue about how we can work together to prevent crime and improve outcomes for children and young people.

Who are we?

NCH is one of the largest children's charities in the UK. We run nearly 500 services and work with more than 170,000 children, young people and their families across the UK, some of the most vulnerable in our society. We complement our role in promoting social justice through our services by lobbying and campaigning for change. NCH is one of the main providers of the Children's Centres and are the sector's leading provider of preventive and intensive support to families with vulnerable children, including those in care, in trouble with the law, who are disabled and who have mental health problems.

Our purpose is to help the most vulnerable children and young people break through the barriers caused by injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. Our vision is of a world where all children and young people have a sense of belonging, are loved and valued and have the ability to reach their potential.

NCH recognises the need for working between professionals who provide health, social and educational services and support for children and young people at risk of, or involved in, offending. NCH has extensive experience of bringing together statutory and voluntary agencies to facilitate the delivery of services. We work with young people at risk or who are offenders because:

- They have reduced chances in life compared with other children and young people
- They suffer significant disadvantages and wide variation in the services they receive
- They need specialist help and support to reach their potential
- Targeted prevention can improve the life chances of individuals at risk of offending as well as addressing the issues/fears associated with anti-social behaviour and youth crime
- Young people require support to help them assume responsibility for their behaviour and the impact it may have on others
- Before young people can learn to value others they have to develop a belief in themselves

NCH runs services to:

- Provide alternatives to custody, such as intensive and remand foster care
- Help families deal with issues arising from anti-social behaviour

- Provide services that address the causes and risk of offending behaviour
- Provide specialist education and vocational training for children and young people
- Provide the knowledge and skills required by young people to avoid re-offending
- Provide local support through befriending, outreach and advocacy
- Address the complex needs of the individual based upon their personal circumstances, including health and emotional wellbeing

NCH is committed to evidence based practice and we understand the need for services to have demonstrable and specific outcomes. We are also investing heavily in the development of outcome measures that reflect the outcomes frameworks of the four nations of the UK.

NCH's response to the draft strategy

- Given the changes to the structure of government, stronger links between youth justice and children's services need to be centred upon achieving improved outcomes for children and young people
- Prevention needs to be truly core to the YJB agenda
- Further engagement with the voluntary sector is needed with realistic funding
- The strategy should not be finalised until the issue of conflicting government targets has been addressed and alternative, cross-cutting indicators agreed
- For the strategy to be effective clearer recommendations are needed and the actions listed in the draft strategy should be more specific
- There should be a greater emphasis on interagency working and the links to the health agenda need to be made more explicit
- Children and young people's views and experiences should be canvassed and included throughout the strategy

General approach

NCH welcomes the emphasis on targeted and sustained early prevention programmes and on effective partnership working with universal services. Both of these elements, NCH believes, are essential not only to reducing youth crime - but also to identifying and meeting the needs of those children and young people directly affected.

Such an approach is particularly welcome given the recent announcement to changes to the machinery of government, including the creation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). We are very encouraged by this more joined-up approach, bringing together key aspects of policy affecting children and young people.

NCH has welcomed the fact that the new department will assume responsibility from the Home Office for the Respect agenda well as leading a new emphasis across government on the prevention of youth offending. We will look forward to a revised version of the YJB strategy that reflects these

changes in a more holistic approach to young people that places their needs centre stage.

"I used to always find that people looked down on me and didn't trust me, and I know in myself that it was because of my lifestyle I was hard to trust.

Here, I felt they used to always give me the benefit of the doubt and that made me feel like a normal person. The staff were always like, you know they weren't all suits and ties, they were casually dressed which made the environment like more relaxed, it made me more able. I mean I could confide in the staff here more than I could from any other places. I found that they listened to me and they would care and they were genuine, which is always half the battle. People before were more interested in getting statistics, I was just another number on their books. I found that NCH were there for me and treated me like a person."

NCH service user

Greater investment in early interventions

To give this change of emphasis real drive we would like to see a greater proportion of the YJB's budget allocated to prevention, especially where targeted initiatives have been tied in more fully to the broader children's agenda.

The disconnection between funding for YJB initiatives and funding for local children's services (even where aims are complimentary) has created real problems in the past. NCH would like to see a seamless approach based on identified needs that cuts across organisational boundaries.

The strategy refers to 'monitoring' the impact of greater localism and devolution of funding without saying how they will make the links. How will YOT's more fully engage with the LAA process, for example?

NCH Ayrshire Crossover Project

This service targets those young people between the ages of 14 and 17 who are most at risk of, or who are already involved in, offending in order to affect change and reduce their offending behaviour. The aim is to reduce the risk of custody and to work with young people within their own communities.

The project works in partnership with social services, education, health, youth justice services and the courts to provide programmes that enable young people to face up to their offending and to take responsibility for their life choices.

The project provides individual pathway plans to reduce offending addressing issues such as education, relationships, community involvement, health etc. It also works to promote inclusion; provides meaningful employment and training opportunities; promotes the constructive use of leisure time; provides support and advice on welfare rights, housing, education, health, money management and other relevant issues according to the young person's individual needs.

Re-conviction and custody rates

The strategy notes that youth reconviction rates have fallen – but this needs to be weighed against other trends in youth justice. NCH is concerned about the increasing criminalisation of young people through the ASBO system and agree that a more proportionate approach to anti-social behaviour is needed that does not start with criminal justice interventions.

We believe that the increased use of custody in recent years is one of the most alarming developments in youth justice. The number of custodial sentences imposed during 2004 is almost 60% higher than in the early 1990s. In addition, the average age of children detained has fallen, and black and ethnic minority children remain over-represented in the incarcerated population.

An effective strategy to develop alternatives to custody must run alongside - and fully connect with - this youth crime prevention strategy. Alternatives to custody have a proven track record in reducing re-offending. So, for example, we are delighted that the YJB is running a three year pilot scheme offering intensive fostering as an alternative to custody. NCH is delivering two of the three pilots, which are being evaluated by the research team at York University. This research will inform the further use of intensive fostering with young offenders.

We believe that running alongside this research programme, the YJB needs to look urgently at future funding options for this model that can make the link between youth justice and social welfare – thereby enabling local areas to design a service that is centred on the needs of the young person. This work will need to address the current financial disincentives for Children's Services Departments to providing accommodation for children within the youth justice system.

We were delighted to see the extension of multi-treatment foster care included in the Care Matters white paper. We believe this is a useful step forward and would urge the government to make the links between the uses of specialist foster care in different contexts.

NCH Intensive Fostering Programme

Intensive fostering is a community based sentence but not an easy option for the children sentenced, it teaches new skills to improve emotion regulation and social functioning. The programme has high expectations of the behaviour of the children on the programme.

The intensive fostering programme attempts to surround the child with positive role models and mentors. The children are isolated from negative peers and taught the skills they missed earlier in their development that lead to pro-social interaction.

The goal of intensive fostering is to decrease anti-social behaviour and increase appropriate behaviour of troubled children by developing pro social skills through a combination of close supervision, combined with fair and consistent limits and clear consequences for negative behaviour, within a supportive relationship.

During their time in this specialist foster placement the emphasis is on deterring negative peer associations (unlike a custodial sentence where they will be meeting with other children who have also offended) and changing patterns of behaviour associated with offending. They are also able to develop an ability to take positive decisions about their future.

The programme also works with the child's family including a weekly family consultation with a member of the programme staff focused on increasing effective parenting skills and continued support for up to three months following successful completion of a placement.

Re-balancing the debate

The strategy talks in some detail about crimes and anti-social behaviour committed by children and young people. While there is some acknowledgement that young people are also the victims of crime, we believe that the document needs to adopt a more balanced approach. NCH believes it is vital that young people's offending and antisocial behaviour should be kept firmly in perspective. Young people are statistically more likely to be the victims of offending behaviour than the perpetrators.

It would be useful if the document were re-drafted to include a more complete picture on the extent of young people's victimisation and on the extensive over-lap between offending behaviour and victimisation. We are aware that the charity Victim Support is carrying out some research in this area at the moment which could usefully contribute to this debate.

Research has shown that particular groups of socially excluded children and young people are at higher risk of becoming both offenders and victims of crime. We believe more needs to be done to target vulnerable groups. This is where NCH's expertise lies and we would be happy to share our experience and learning.

"I've been stung in the past, folk you don't know assume they're in there cos they're bad. That's not right, there is always something happened to someone in a home, something has always gone wrong, you don't just get into trouble for nothing, that's the way I see it."

NCH service user

Interface between YOT's and children's services

NCH agrees that YOT's should be promoted as a full partner with children's trusts helping deliver outcomes for children.

In support of this aim, we would like to see far greater detail on the mechanics for how YOT's will work more effectively in partnership with children's trusts. Will YOT's be brought fully under the scope of the Children Act 2004? And, will outcomes for young offenders be measured across the board and not just primarily in relation to a reduction in offending behaviour? We believe that

absolute transparency is needed on how the new arrangements will work and where accountabilities lie.

There also needs to be closer links to the wider youth agenda – prevention is not just about removing opportunities to commit crime, but also about creating suitable alternatives.

NCH Remand Fostering

NCH remand fostering projects provide family based placement alternatives as an alternative secure accommodation or custody for children and young people aged 10 to 16. Additionally young people can be accommodated post custody when they are at risk of re-offending through being homeless on release.

Placements in the community are an alternative to accommodation in secure institutions and do provide a period of stability and an opportunity for young people to develop a more positive future. NCH has been providing remand fostering and alternative to custody placements for over 25 years.

Our projects provide and maintain specialist foster placements offering a high level of support and help for young people in meeting their bail requirements. Through intensive planning and continuous review, placements support the development of community support and pro-social behaviour.

The services work in partnership with YOT's, local authorities, CAMHs, the courts and approved specialist foster carers to ensure a high quality appropriate tailored response to the individual young person. The young person is encouraged to participate in the planning and to give feedback on the placement. Each young person receives intensive supervision and support. This service is specifically aimed at children and young people who are at risk of custody or re-offending and who have complex needs.

NCH outcomes are assessed against the CAF framework for children and young people (adaptations to our outcome measurements reflect the outcome requirements of the 4 nations). Independent evidence has shown that re-offending rates for young people referred to NCH remand fostering are only 20%. The costs of community based placements provided by NCH are up to 50% cheaper and 65% of young people in NCH placements go on to secure employment/training and further education.

Social exclusion and what works in early intervention

The draft strategy refers to: *Reaching out: an action plan on social exclusion*, and states that the YJB will work to influence and shape the work of the Social Exclusion Taskforce and identify how the youth justice system can benefit from and help its work.

NCH runs a number of rehabilitation projects for families at risk of losing their homes as a result of anti-social behaviour. The work of these services has been evaluated by Sheffield Hallam University showing significant social and economic benefits. These projects employ a twin track approach, combining intensive support with focused challenge. We believe that with the right kind of

services tailored to meet the specific needs of the most socially excluded families; their lives can be turned around. NCH sees taking a whole family approach as the key to successfully engaging and transforming the lives of the most vulnerable children and their families.

NCH has welcomed the interim findings of the Families at Risk Review and will continue to work closely with the Social Exclusion Taskforce. We are keen to share findings and learning and would welcome meeting with the YJB to discuss the links between this work and the broader preventative agenda.

NCH Family Intervention Projects

NCH's services have been developed from our learning from NCH's Dundee Families Project which provides floating outreach support to help families retain their existing accommodation. Families referred to these projects tend to be large – a fifth having more than four children; they have low employment rates and are often in debt. The results of these projects are impressive. The levels of complaints about anti-social behaviour substantially reduced, 95% of families maintained their tenancies; 80% managed to reduce the threat of possession action and in 84% of families school attendance improved.

We have undertaken initial analysis of the cost savings of our Intensive Family Support Projects which show savings of £4,000 per family. Our success in developing this form of intervention has been recognised by the Respect Unit which has based its preferred model on the work pioneered by NCH.

Risk factors – universal risk assessment

The draft strategy states that: *“Targeted and sustained early prevention programmes are needed to engage those most likely to be the offenders of the future.”* We agree that effective programmes will need to counteract the range of risk factors linked for poor outcomes for children – some of which may translate into offending behaviour in later life. But it should be remembered that most young people with identified risk factors will not go on to offend.

Risk factors associated with possible future offending behaviour are equally likely to be indicative of other potential poor outcomes for children and young people. NCH has grave concerns about labelling young people by such a targeted approach to risk management. A more joined up approach would be to make the links to universal risk assessment processes.

NCH Family Intervention Team (FIT)

FIT is a multi disciplinary NCH project working in partnership with health education, and social services. Its objectives are to provide an accessible, equitable and effective service for children and young people with poor emotional well being or behavioural problems.

The project works with children, young people and their families identified as needing extra help that is not available through universal services. Referrals are accepted from primary health care teams, social services and education professionals.

The project provides a service for children and young people who: are experiencing emotional, behavioural and social difficulties in school; are on the brink of exclusion due to emotional, behavioural and social difficulties; do not wish to remain at home; are self-harming; are on the margins of criminal activity; and, have behavioural problems which do fall into any diagnostic group.

The family intervention team offer a range of interventions including:

- Individual work based upon a solution-focused brief therapy
- Tailored interventions to suit individual children and young people
- Group work that focuses on developing skills to enhance confidence and self-esteem
- Skills development via learning opportunities or by accessing activities

Engagement with the voluntary sector

NCH welcomes the commitment to work in line with the Compact, but has concerns that YOT's and the YJB have not sufficiently engaged with voluntary sector providers in the past. We hope that this strategy serves as a turning point, but believe that improvements in this area will need to be closely monitored. We believe the strategy needs to be clearer about how voluntary organisations will be involved strategically, for example through involvement in YOT management groups.

Targets

NCH welcomes the target to reduce the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system. We also recognise the clash between this preventative target and the Offences Brought to Justice Targets which has, we believe, significantly contributed to the ever expanding number of young people entering the youth justice system.

We are therefore delighted that the YJB is proposing to work with ACPO on this issue. However, we would query whether the proposed re-focus of the Offences Brought to Justice Reward on to more serious offences will be sufficient on its own.

The strategy also mentions the introduction of a restorative disposal for minor offences and indicates that there will be further work with ACPO to look at the ways that restorative and reparative interventions can be recognised and rewarded as police performance targets. While welcoming this, we believe the details should be fully worked out and trialled before the strategy is finalised. If adequate incentives are not put in place first, then this will undermine the whole basis for this strategy.

When looking at possible solutions policy makers will need to bear in mind that there will not always be a quick remedy. The causes of offending behaviour will often be complex. Indicators will need to be crafted that reward a sustainable approach that can be tailored to the needs of the individual.

“When I first came to the unit I wasn’t talking to my mum, I wasn’t in education and I’d been in a secure unit. The staff here never gave up, they just kept trying with me and eventually I began to trust them and things started to turn around”.

NCH service user

Groups disproportionately represented in the youth justice system

We believe that this section is weak and lacks detail. We know that 40% of children in custody have a history of being looked after. NCH is concerned that the needs of this particularly vulnerable group are falling down the gap between this strategy and the Care Matters white paper (which, NCH believes, did not give sufficient prominence to this issue). We would like to see a cross-departmental strategy developed to address this issue.

The actions listed in the strategy lack substance. How are you proposing to reduce the inappropriate criminalisation of looked-after children? NCH believes that all young offenders should be made subject to the same entitlements as those in ‘care’?

Education

Again, this section lacks detail. NCH awaits the results of the DCSF consultation process, which has been looking at the education for young people supervised by the youth justice system. During the consultation the conflicting roles, responsibilities and accountability mechanisms for young offenders’ education were highlighted. Again, this demonstrates the need for the system to be more joined up and centred upon the needs of the young person - and not the demands of the system. We believe that the outcomes of the DCSF consultation should influence, and be reflected in, this strategy.

“My care plan was the first thing I worked on but I didn’t want to do it, I just kept running away. When I came back from secure that’s when I started behaving. I knew everyone was trying to help me so I just got into it. I was closer to home here and I turned everything around, did my English and maths exams, standard grades. I never went to education in secure. I went from no education to attending, got good feedback, I caught up quickly.”

NCH service user

Homelessness

Young people leaving the secure estate are over-represented amongst the homelessness. NCH would like to see greater incentives to encourage potential accommodation providers, such as are available to foster carers.

Other agencies and agendas

We would like to see a section included that makes the links to the health agenda, especially given our knowledge of the particular mental health needs of young offenders.

NCH specialist multi-disciplinary (CAMHs) services

The MIST service in Torfaen provides a new and innovative model – a service based, network-managed, CAMHs service led by NCH. The project aims to address the needs of children and young people whose family situation or school placement is at the point of breakdown due to their mental health needs. The project is funded and managed in partnership with a statutory consortium, including social services, education, local health board and local NHS Trust.

The service is aimed at children and young people whose needs are so complex that they require specialist support, including placements outside of their own community. The children and young people have difficulties with: emotional and social development; managing aggressive behaviour; and, interpersonal relationships/impulse control.

Therapeutic interventions are delivered through a multi-disciplinary team. The team offers 24/7 support and may in certain instances make a long-term commitment of several years to individual users. The service is needs led.

The team consists of therapeutic foster carers, a consultant clinical psychologist, a project manager/clinical nurse specialist in psychiatry, a project worker, community support worker and an administrator.

Since it's the inception, the project has achieved significant changes for children and young people including: the reduction of risk taking behaviour and episodes of self-harm; preventing young people from entering custody; maintaining education placements; and, reducing the numbers involved in the youth justice system.

Conclusions

On reading the draft strategy document it is clear that it has been written at a time of great change and uncertainty. If the strategy is to serve as a useful steer over next five years, as intended, then we believe some of this uncertainty needs to be addressed before the document is finalised.

This will be particularly important in relation to the sections on conflicting government indicators, devolved funding sources, the relationship with the voluntary sector and the mechanisms for engagement with the broader children's agenda. While we welcome the main thrust of this strategy, and the policy areas highlighted, NCH would like to see a more robust and detailed strategy produced over the coming months.

Kate Mulley
NCH – July 2007