



The Association of Youth Offending Team Managers (AYM) response to the Commission on Young Lives consultation.

About the AYM

The AYM is a professional association representing the majority of youth offending teams (YOT) and their managers in England.

Section 39 (1) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 requires the co-operation of the named statutory partners to form a YOT. Section 38 (1, 2) identifies the statutory partners and places upon them a duty to co-operate in order to secure youth justice services appropriate to their area. These statutory partners are the local authority, police, the probation service, and health. To support the YOT, additional partners may also be recruited to the joint strategic effort to prevent offending by children and young people.

The Association is able to draw on the wealth of knowledge and the breadth of members' experience to promote public understanding of youth crime issues and to play its part in shaping the youth crime agenda.

Our members run services providing community-based supervision for children and young people who offend. We also work with children in custody and work closely with staff in secure units and young offender institutions to ensure that young people receiving custody experience as smooth a transition as possible into custody and back into the community.

The AYM welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the consultation from Commission on Young Lives. As Chair of the AYM I have been interviewed as part of the research. Members of the AYM Executive members are also willing to be interviewed as part of this research. If this is something the Commission would like to take advantage of please contact the Chair hazel.williamson@staffordshire.gov.uk

1. What leads to vulnerability and crisis and why aren't services as effective as young people and families need them to be?

AYM members and their services have embraced child-first principles and have invested and often manage early help and prevention services to ensure that children and their families receive the right help at the right time. However, youth justice services are diverse and as a result, do not always have immediate access to health provision for example and children in some areas of the country may need to wait longer for assessments and interventions from partner agencies.

Poverty underlies many problems and vulnerable children and their families often live in areas with poor housing where networks of community support are fractured and where there are high levels of crime and exploitation. Long waits for adult services such as mental health provision can also mean that needs remain unmet.

Problems for families in need of support from AYM members are often entrenched and intergenerational, and these families may find themselves bouncing between services which are not designed to support for lengthy periods of time or being referred to services which are not joined up, trauma informed or rooted in their local community or culture. Funding aimed to achieve short-term objectives is unlikely to provide long term solutions.

In addition, most services require engagement by the service user, more needs to be achieved in terms of providing outreach services to ensure that those children and families that cannot, or who are unlikely to want to, engage with services do. This means ensuring language barriers, transport issues and trust issues are addressed – many vulnerable people (children and adults) have a mistrust of professionals, by taking services to them and demonstrating a commitment to them as important individuals, rather than asking them to engage with services, many will participate. We think that the research into Contextualised Safeguarding by Dr Carlene Firmin illustrates this approach, particularly for children who are involved in the justice system.

Good communication is essential if families are to receive the support they need, this means services must listen to families, who often feel the solutions they have are not listened, or responded to; ineffective communication can result in unrealistic expectations on families and resultant disengagement and distrust.

Austerity has limited the capacity of smaller, local community groups and cut the diversity of prevention services available to families, often meaning that problems become crises before help is offered. Without one agreed and identified practice model, agencies can end up using different languages and lack understanding around relational and restorative practices. Finally, there needs to be better join-up between adult and children's services if work with families is to be effective.

2. How vulnerable families and communities living in high-risk situations can be supported to strengthen their home and support environment, providing strong support for parents

Vulnerable families would be better supported by a clear, single point of access to services which are consistent, strengths and community based, culturally competent and timely. Children and young people need access to positive recreational activities and 'safe spaces', particularly in the most deprived areas. All services need to develop a culture of empowering families, developing protective factors and building on informal support networks. We would want to build on the ABCD (asset-based community development) approach to incorporate community builders, connectors, grass roots and third sector organisations.

Vulnerable young people are often bored; there is little to do in the areas in which they live to occupy their time productively. However, the cost to families wishing for their children to engage with more positive activities, is often a barrier and this exacerbates the divide between those who have and those who don't. Consideration needs to be given as to how young people can be supported into accessible and affordable positive activities before it reaches crisis point.

Early help and prevention services need to be culturally competent and have a strong and diverse workforce. The balance between funding and resultant availability of statutory and early help provision requires further research.

3. What support do young people need to ensure good mental health and wellbeing

This requires a systemic response from services which need to work with the whole ecology of the family in order to have long-term impact. Better integration and further joint commissioning arrangements between CAMHS, social care services and education could improve communication and join-up.

Mental health training and training to support trauma informed practice for early intervention services is key, as is a focus on the basics of good mental health for the family: discussions on and support regarding mental health issues need to be promoted as standard across services but particularly in schools. There is the view amongst some professionals that some academies are focussed on academic achievement to the detriment of support services and building resilience more broadly.

Currently there is a move towards on-line mental health support services for young people. Whilst this works well for some, for others it does not. Each young person needs an individualised offer, tailored to their own specific needs. Early intervention and support are key – at present waiting lists for therapeutic input, autism support, ADHD and neuro developmental needs are lengthy, resulting in escalation of problems.

4. How schools and colleges can be inclusive, can identify and can respond positively and proactively to young people who are at risk

Schools and colleges undoubtedly provide protective factors for children and young people at risk. They provide a stable environment where reflection, resilience and re-direction can be achieved. The positive influence and life changing situations that can be created through the positive interaction between school staff and students in a truly inclusive environment are key to establishing sustainable change. However, this is not the experience for all children, particularly those in contact with the law, a new mind-set needs to be achieved to achieve inclusion on a national scale.

Where schools are able to make reasonable adjustments to meet the changing needs for students who find themselves at risk, and where an understanding and a sympathetic tolerance of their individual situation is applied within a restorative strengths-based approach then improvement will be demonstrated. Where a regime of repetitive isolation and fixed term exclusions is routinely applied without personalisation, then the formation of positive relationships to sustain change will always be a barrier to a child or a young person to feeling included and welcomed within their school community.

5. Why a disproportionate number of children in care are getting into trouble with the law and what needs to change to prevent this and help them flourish.

The biggest issue for teenagers in care is the lack of suitable placements. The current 'marketplace' for placements is broken, with teenagers at risk of exploitation and perceived to be risky always coming bottom of the list for providers who will prioritise 'easier' younger children. This means that

young people at risk of criminal justice involvement will often be in placements which do not meet their needs and where risks are increased. These then break down, leading to multiple placements, fractured relationships and inconsistency of care as well as confirming the young person's identity as a problem, unwanted, unlovable, unworthy. In this context, therapeutic relationships are impossible and the young person's needs will not be met, not least because the logistics of out of area placements present so many challenges.

Similarly, frequent changes in social worker can lead to young people feeling that no individual worker cares about them, meaning they are less likely to be invested in their own future and unable to make a positive contribution to society. Improvements in the professional status, reputation and pay of social work as a profession will lead to better retention of good staff.

Services, including the police and other criminal justice partners, need to become more trauma informed and empowered to work restoratively, recognising that sometimes behaviours which are within the parameters of 'normal' can be criminalised for children in care. Key to this is an improved offer of training and support to carers who are struggling. Caring for vulnerable teenagers is a highly skilled and complex task and should be recognised as such.

At present, the statutory frameworks in which youth justice, police, children's care and education services operate are not sufficiently aligned. Each has their own inspection framework with sometimes contradictory expectations which lead to disparity in outcomes or unintended consequences. Young people in the care and criminal justice system often have multiple assessment and planning meetings which are part of different statutory processes and run to different timescales. More could be done to align these processes to reduce duplication which in turn would lead to greater engagement by children and young people.

6. Who should be protecting vulnerable young people from exploitation and violence? What do young people at risk need and how can this be delivered at scale?

Families and local communities will usually be better placed than statutory services to protect vulnerable young people from exploitation and violence. This means we need better support for families at an earlier stage, from professionals who are non-judgemental, culturally competent and who have the time to form meaningful, respectful relationships. Restorative practice (such as family group conferencing) can have massive impact, and we need to build the capacity of communities to protect and nurture their young people, providing them with opportunities, giving them second (and third) chances, encouraging them to aspire, allowing them to integrate. Exploitation and violence often happen outside of the home, so we need safe spaces in local communities, supported by all members of the community and with policing focussed on targeting the adult perpetrators of exploitation and those who are fanning the violence. Schools can position themselves as 'safe spaces' for vulnerable young people with reduced timetables or exclusions minimised and a therapeutic, child-first, supportive and holistic approach embedded, similar to the approaches advocated by Dr Carlene Firmin as previously referenced.

It is necessary to invest time and energy into developing relationships with this group of young people. AYM members view parents as protective partners and seek to maximise their contribution to the prevention, disruption, and conviction of perpetrators.

'Safe space' also needs to mean safe online space. We know that many physical examples of exploitation and violence start or are magnified through social media. It is our view that much more can be done through better regulation and swifter action by social media companies as well as better

education of young people (and the general public) about appropriate and inappropriate use of social media.

7. *How can the criminal justice system work more effectively to improve outcomes for young people?*

Given what we now know about child brain development and the impact of trauma on behaviour, the current age of criminal responsibility can no longer be justified. Additionally, the system needs to be remodelled along non adversarial lines and become genuinely problem-solving, with all relevant agencies around the table to devise a response to a crime which is most likely to make a difference. Training and professional standards for all criminal justice agencies need to be modelled on child-first, inclusive and restorative, with a public education campaign to match. The delay in some police processes and lengthy periods of time for children released under investigation needs to change; it is counter-productive in terms of promoting positive identity shift or sustaining/adopting positive activities. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is not fit for purpose, with in-built delay and conflict in approaches of police and children's services regarding exploitation.

Finally, current arrangements around child custody need to be reviewed. The current all or nothing approach does little to prepare young people for release and unnecessarily breaks positive community ties. Release on temporary licence should be an expectation from the start of sentence and day-release, part time custody or half-way arrangements should be explored. Large establishments run by prison service staff can never be appropriate for children who have invariably suffered multiple traumas. Custody, if it is necessary, needs to be a flexible, in small therapeutic environments located near to a child's own home and much more aligned with services in the community.

8. *The Commission on Young Lives will design a national strategy to prevent crisis and help young people to succeed. We want to learn more about the systemic issues that drive risk and what you think can be done to reform the system nationally and locally.*

There is a difficulty around the image and reputation of social work. Families and teenagers often do not want to engage with social workers because of historical experiences or fears. Schools often have a better, more positive relationships with families – they are visible, accessible and often seen as supportive. More could be done to use existing, trusting relationships to broker relationships with social workers and more can be done nationally by policy makers to promote a more positive, progressive image of the profession, making it more attractive to a wider range of professionals from all communities and to build public trust.

Information sharing, recording practices and different approaches to consent are huge barriers to developing a holistic and integrated, individualised support service for families. Duplication, lack of consistency and gaps are inevitable whilst support services have separate data systems in place.

9. *The Commission aims to address both costs and value for money. We want to bring together work that has been done on how prevention and early intervention be valued in terms of a sustainable outcome, as well as make compelling arguments for where additional investment is most needed and possible routes to that investment.*

Short-term funding streams can lead to valuable support services disappearing. For services to be effectively developed and delivered, longer term funding needs to be made available. Research should be undertaken to identify best and effective practice that can then be delivered nationally.

Finally, the role of YOT Partnership Boards in preventing youth crime needs to be further defined and better resourced with a return to ringfenced funding specifically for youth crime prevention work.

Hazel Williamson, Chair of the AYM