

Care and Aftercare –not Custody: Learning from International Approaches to Youth Custody and Transition into Communities

2024 Churchill Fellow

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all the young people I met during my time working within Secure Care for Children, thank you. You are the reason I felt compelled to do this Fellowship and I am so grateful for the time I spent with you and the things I learned from you and the systems you live within. Thank you also to the staff who work tirelessly, every day, to get the best outcomes for these young people and their families, recognising them within their developmental contexts.

To everyone I met along this journey, who gave me time, replied to my endless emails, phone calls and questions and then opened the doors to their facilities, letting me see and experience first-hand their passion and dedication to justice involving young people, thank you. The kindness, warmth, interest and effort from all those I met over the course of my Fellowship is something I will be eternally grateful for.

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Image Credit: SiS, Raby Lund

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleanor Hinchliffe is a Social Worker and Clinical Manager in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in the North of England. Eleanor has experience managing health services within the Children and Young People's Secure Estate.

Her work in secure settings and various mental health fields has allowed Eleanor to collaborate with dedicated professionals and directly support people in need. She is particularly interested in how services are designed and delivered, and how this affects both service users and providers. Her focus lies in understanding how different parts of a system interact and influence overall outcomes.



The UK secure estate for young people comprises four types of provision, with experiences of custody varying widely depending on placement.

Eleanor's fellowship explored systems in Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, New York, and Missouri, examining how they use custody/care to support young people's successful reintegration into communities. She also investigated how these systems maintain support to reduce reoffending and improve long-term outcomes for young people, while decreasing victims of crime.

This report aims to inform policymakers, youth custody providers, youth justice teams, commissioners, social work teams, local authorities, and others involved with justice involved young people. It connects international approaches to the UK context, offering insights for service design and aftercare strategies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND ITINERARY

Care and Aftercare, not Custody: Learning from International Approaches to Youth Custody and Transition into Communities.

Eleanor Hinchliffe, 2024 Churchill Fellow

Introduction

Custody for children in England and Wales is failing to achieve positive outcomes for children, despite the significant cost to the taxpayer. With a recidivism rate of more than 60% for children who have been in custody, the system is not working, and children, families and communities are suffering.

Reasons for the failures within the youth custody provision in England and Wales include the reliance on large correctional facilities that house most young people in custody, resulting in children often being placed far away from home in environments that are punitive and traumatising. Additionally, the lack of aftercare and difficult transitions mean that young people quickly fall back into the same patterns as before their incarceration.

This report aims to offer a thematic overview of youth justice accommodation in four places recognised as international good practice models and have good outcomes for children leaving secure accommodation (or equivalent); Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, New York City and Missouri.

On the next page is an itinerary of the places visited that informed the findings and recommendations of this report.

Key Words:

Youth Justice, Youth Custody, Secure Estate, Secure Accommodation, Transition, Community, Recidivism, Trauma Informed Care, Youth Offending, Family Intervention.

ITINERARY

OCTOBER 2024

Sweden

- Visit to SiS youth home Klarälvsgården, Orretorp, Sweden.
- Visit to SiS youth home Råby, Lund, Sweden.

Belgium

- Visit to IPPJ Saint Servais, Namur, Belgium.
- Visit to Rescaled Europe Head Office, Brussels, Belgium, meeting with Noa Shoshan.

Portugal

- Visit to DGRSP head office, Lisbon, Portugal, meeting with Catarina Pral and Ana Palma.
- Visit to Educational Centre Padre Antonio de Oliveira, Lisbon, Portugal.
- Visit to Educational Centre Navarro de Paiva, Lison, Portugal.
- Visit to Autonomy House, Central Lisbon, Portugal.
- Visit to Educational Centre Bela Vista, Lisbon, Portugal
- Meeting with Dr Margarida Macedo, Director of Juvenile Justice for Portugal, DGRSP head office, Lisbon, Portugal.

APRIL – MAY 2025

New York, USA

- Meeting with Associate Commissioner Johan Peguero of Close to Home and Non-Secure Detention, Youth and Family Justice, New York Administration of Children's Services (ACS).
- Meeting with Mark Steward, former Director of Youth Services in Missouri and founder of The Missouri Youth Services Institute (MYSI).
- Meeting with Charles Galbreath, New York MYSI consultant to Good Shepherd Services, New York City.
- Discussion with Antony McCloud, New York Administration of Children's Services.
- Visit to Barbara Blum Non-Secure Detention, Brooklyn, New York City.

Missouri, USA

- Visit to Division of Youth Services, Jefferson City, Missouri.
- Meeting with Mike Pitzen, Director of Youth Services, Missouri.
- Meeting with Dana Welsh, Education Programme Manager, Division of Youth Services, Missouri.
- Visit to Langsford House (community based residential facility), Northwest Region, Missouri.
- Visit to ARC Day treatment facility, Northwest Region, Missouri.
- Visit to Northwestern Regional Office, meeting with case management team.
- Visit to Riverbend Treatment Centre (secure care), Blue Springs, Northwestern Region, Missouri.
- Visit to Clay Country Juvenile Office, Northwestern Region, Missouri.
- Visit to Watkins Mill Park Camp (moderate care), Northwestern Region, Missouri

KEY THEMES AND FINDINGS

Six key themes were identified through the research, identified as important in creating a successful and supportive youth custodial system. These were:

1. Close to home, small scale facilities offer the best outcomes.
2. Education is fundamental to time spent in any form of secure placement.
3. Therapeutic community and environments create safety and change, not just therapy.
4. Looking after staff is imperative to effective care.
5. Commitment to effective transition and aftercare is fundamental.
6. Differentiated accommodation options and step-down provision are effective in supportive, positive transition/reintegration.

The research also highlights additional considerations and shared challenges, summarised at the end of the thematic overview. These include the length of stay or sentence, the ability of providers or state agencies to determine release and aftercare timing, and efforts to align transitions with the academic calendar. Notably, none of the places visited transition children into the adult justice system (except for dual- committed young people in Missouri). Common challenges included post-pandemic staffing shortages, limited access to community health and mental health support on transition, the increasing complexity of young people's needs, and the greater difficulties associated with supporting girls in these environments.

Conclusions

Delivering youth custody services that prioritise rehabilitation over punishment is a national and international challenge. Justice-involved young people often have histories of trauma, disadvantage, and time in state care. To reduce reoffending, custody environments must be trauma-informed, therapeutic, and provide both care and effective aftercare.

International models - from Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, New York City, and Missouri - demonstrate that small, therapeutic settings achieve better outcomes and lower recidivism. These systems focus on the child's developmental context, family involvement, social capital, and hope, while recognising that healing continues beyond incarceration.

We must invest in small-scale, local placements offering staged care, achievable goals, and interventions that support both young people and their families. Positive peer influence should be encouraged through structured learning and shared experiences.

Crucially, the workforce must be recognised as a professional, life-changing vocation, with staff receiving high-quality training, supervision, and fair compensation.

Recommendations

The research and experience that formed this Fellowship has led to seven recommendations, focused at a local and national level. These are:

1. The Youth Custody Service, supported by central government, should close all Young Offenders Institutions as soon as possible, replacing them with small-scale close to home facilities.
2. Alongside local authorities, the Youth Custody Service should make Step-down facilities available to all young people in custody to support phased reintegration back into communities.
3. Central government and the Youth Custody Service should create a 'Family Strategy', which includes a commitment to integrated family support, and the provision for family therapy for all young people coming into their custody.
4. The Youth Custody Service and the Youth Justice Service should develop a robust 'Aftercare' strategy and package, alongside partner agencies including DfE, NHS and local government to ensure that no young person leaving custody falls through the cracks.
5. The Youth Custody Service should review the language used to describe time in secure accommodation.
6. All staff working with youth involved young people should be provided with adequate training related to the needs of justice involved youth and appropriate supervision, recognising the emotional impact of creating and maintaining therapeutic environments.
7. Legal recommendations: review the age of criminal responsibility in the UK, aligning this with the UNCRC recommendations. Consideration should also be given to abolishing transfer of young people from the children's estate to the adult estate.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Context to Youth Custody in England and Wales

There has been a significant reduction in the number of children and young people remanded and sentenced to custodial settings since the turn of the 21st century. According to the Youth Custody Report (2024), there were 2610 young people in custody in the year 2000, whereas the average monthly population of children in custody 2022-2023 was 430 (Youth Custody Service, 2024). Whilst this is positive, it begs the question as to why the experience of young people who enter custody is so stark, given the significant expense of looking after such a small amount of young people.

Within the UK, when a young person is either remanded or sentenced to custody, they can be placed in one of four distinct settings. These are set out in the table below.

Type of Institution	Purpose	Placement	Inspection	Average Annual Cost per placement (correct as of January 2024)
Secure Children's Home (SCH)	Typically run by Local Authorities or private companies. Boys and girls, aged 10-18 Currently 107 placements are commissioned by the YCS in 7 SCH's across the country. SCH's house some of the youngest and/or most vulnerable young people. Highest staffing levels across the estate. Delivering some of the best quality care across the estate, aiming to deliver trauma-informed and therapeutic care for the best outcomes.	Placed by the YCS. SCH's have a say as to whether they will accept the young person or not, based on a range of factors.	Ofsted and CQC.	£299,459.47

Secure Children's Home (SCH) (cont)	Embedded education, with children in education 30 hours per week. Some SCH's also take children detained under S25 of the Children's Act, 1989 for their own welfare.			
Secure Training Centre (STC)	Contracted to G4S (private company). For boys and girls aged 12-18. Typically, younger and more vulnerable young people, but who do not require a SCH. Only 1 provision currently remaining open due to closures of others due to safeguarding concerns. Aim to offer 30 hours of education per week.	Placed by the YCS.	Ofsted, with HMPPS and the CQC.	£305,892.40
Young Offenders Institution (YOI)	Run directly by HMPPS. For boys aged 15-18, however recent pressures in the adult estate have meant that boys up to 19 are remaining in YOI's. There are 4 YOI's currently in operation for children in England and Wales, housing between around 46 - 250 boys within each at any one time, typically on 'wings'. YOI's have been repeatedly inspected as offering poor outcomes for children, characterised by extreme violence, limited access to education and long times spent in cells, as well as the use of pain-inducing restraint techniques.	Placed by the YCS.	HMPPS with Ofsted and CQC	£129,333.58
Secure School	Run by Oasis Restore, commissioned by the Youth Custody Service. Can hold up to 49 young people, boys and girls aged 12-18. The long-term ambition aim is for secure schools to take over from YOIs and STC's. The primary focus is on education and therapeutic intervention is also built into the timetable for young people.	Placed by the YCS.	Ofsted and CQC.	Not provided

Table 1. Overview of Secure Estate for Children and Young People in England and Wales. (Cost data: HC Deb, 11 January 2024, cW.)

In 2023–2024, most children receiving custodial sentences were placed in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs, 69%), with 18% in Secure Children's Homes (SCHs) and 14% in Secure Training Centres (STCs) (Youth Justice Board, 2025). Annual placement costs range from £129,000 to £305,000 (HC Deb, 11 January 2024, cW).

Children's experiences of custody vary significantly by institution. SCHs are typically rated more favourably, with children reporting better relationships with staff, more time in education, and higher regulatory ratings of 'good' or 'outstanding.' However, SCH places are limited, and effective transition planning remains a challenge (Social Care Wales, 2019).

Who are the children in custody?

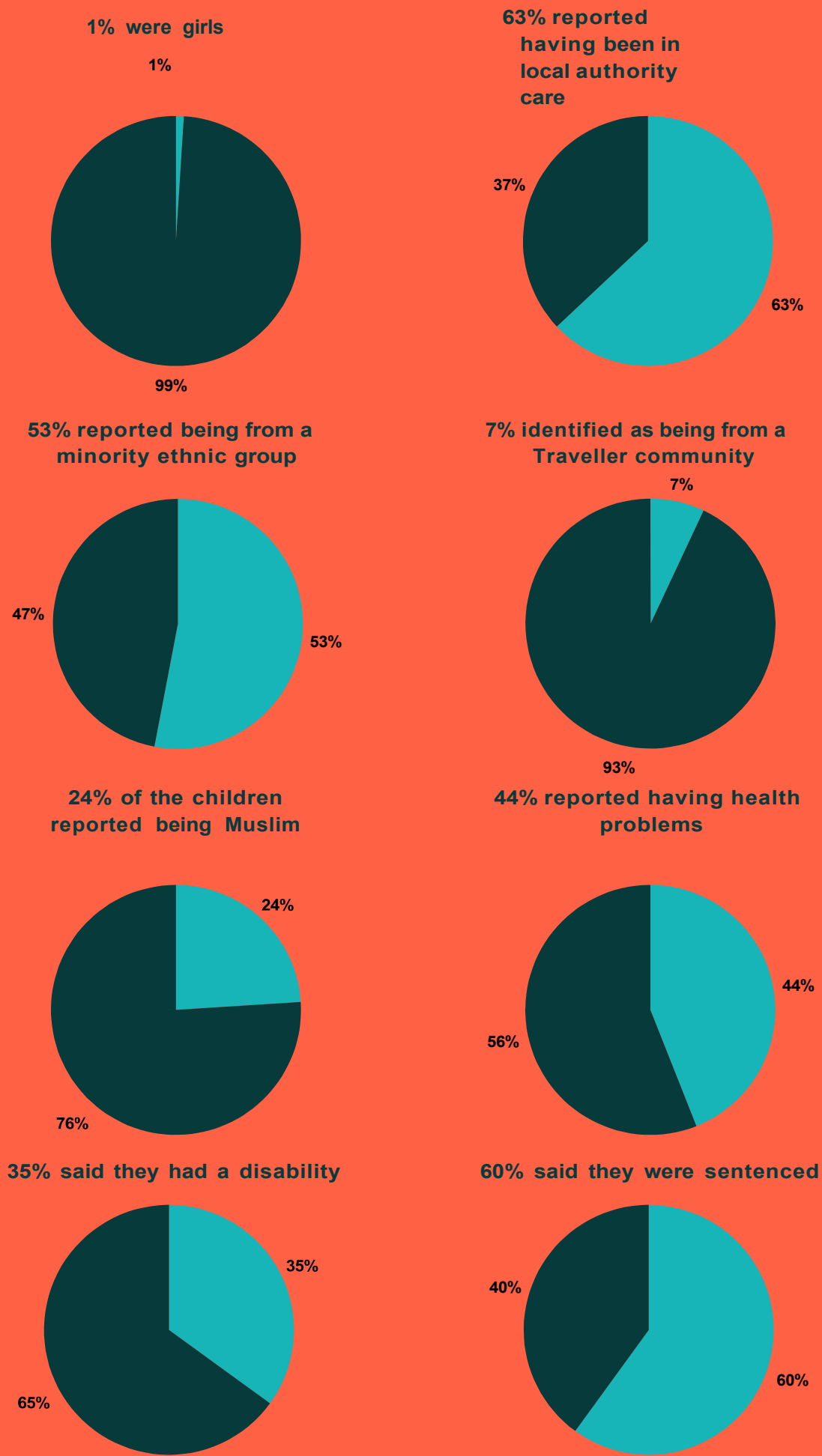
Children in custody are among the most vulnerable in society. Many have experienced multiple traumas, prolonged absence from education (9 in 10 excluded from school), and 63% have been in local authority care (HMPPS, 2024). Mental health issues, communication difficulties, and neurodevelopmental disorders are also far more prevalent in this population, often compounded by a lack of support services.

Boys make up 99% of children in the secure estate, and children from the global majority are over-represented (HMPPS, 2024). The system also struggles to meet the needs of girls, prompting an independent review and new recommendations (Hancock, 2025), with the author stating:

"There is no more urgent mission than these girls" (Hancock, 2025).



Picture of Educational Centre Padre Antonio de Oliveira, Lisbon, Portugal. Image credit: Google



Source: HMI Prisons' detainee surveys

Figure 1. Statistical demographic overview of the children currently in custody (HMPPS, 2024).

Why Are Children in Custody in England and Wales? Legal Context

In England and Wales, children as young as 10 can be held criminally responsible, remanded, and sentenced to custody (Gov.uk, 2025). This is far below the United Nations recommended minimum age of 14 (United Nations, 2019). While children under 18 are treated differently from adults, with a greater focus on community sentencing, they can still receive custodial sentences ranging from four months to life for the most serious offences. Some transition from the youth secure estate to the adult estate to complete their sentence (Rowe & Low, 2024). The average custodial sentence in 2023–2024 was 17.5 months, with most children serving about half that time in secure accommodation (Youth Justice Board, 2025).

Outcomes for Children with Custody Experience

Evidence, both national and international, shows the harm caused by placing a child in custody (Jay, Evans, Frank, & Sharpling, 2019). Custody disrupts development, education, and social circumstances, often leading to poorer long-term outcomes (Paterson-Young, Hazenberg, & Bajwa-Patel, 2019). While custody is sometimes necessary for safety reasons, this time must be used to rehabilitate and support children meaningfully.

The Secure Stairs Integrated Care Framework was introduced with investment from the Department for Education (DfE), Youth Custody Service (YCS), and NHS England to address these vulnerabilities. It aimed to improve care by training staff in psychologically informed practices, embedding health services on-site, and tailoring assessments to children's needs. While impact assessments report positive outcomes, implementation challenges persist, especially in large correctional settings like YOIs (Anna Freud National Centre for Children's and Families, 2022).

Reoffending rates remain high among justice-involved young people. For children released in the year ending March 2023, 66.1% reoffended - up more than 6% from the previous year (Youth Justice Board, 2025).

Conditions in YOIs and STCs

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) found outcomes for 12–18-year-olds in YOIs worsened in 2023–2024 (HMIP, 2024). No YOIs were rated as providing good education, and many were marked by high violence and disorder, with children spending long periods alone in their cells (HMIP, 2024). Cookham Wood YOI was closed after a complete breakdown in behaviour management. Children in custody often face assault, isolation, and deprivation of their basic rights under the UNCRC - all at significant financial and human cost. HMIP also reported that more than double the number of children felt unsafe in custody compared to 2022 (HMIP, 2024).

A thematic review by HMIP, of 50 boys aged 12–17 who had been in custody showed that half were under police investigation within three months of release. Ten were convicted of new crimes, three returned to custody, and six were missing (HMIP, 2019).

Challenges with Release and Transition

The Children's Commissioner (2023) reported that children are often placed far from home, creating barriers to family contact, continuity of health or mental health services, and community reintegration (The Children's Commissioner, 2023). Poor transition planning is a key driver of reoffending. Many young people are released without accommodation, education, training, or access to mental health or substance misuse services. They may also be relocated far from their communities due to a lack of local provision.

While strong transition support is widely recognised as essential to reducing reoffending (Bateman, Hazel, & Wright, 2013), operationalising it remains challenging. The YCS has introduced initiatives like the Case Management Guidance for Resettlement, the five Cs of Resettlement model, and resettlement best practice frameworks. Most secure providers employ dedicated transitions workers who collaborate with youth offending teams (YOTs) to plan aftercare. However, YOTs are separate from secure providers and often lack oversight due to uncertainties around accommodation and other support.

The Need for Change

Despite good intentions and evidence on what children need, the current youth secure estate often causes more harm than good. Other countries have transformed their youth justice systems and improved outcomes for children in custody. The Churchill Fellowship allowed me to explore how countries/places such as Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, New York, and Missouri are meeting these challenges, with a particular focus on aftercare. These countries were chosen for their international reputations, cultural relevance to the UK, and emphasis on supporting children's transitions after custody.

Summaries of these models are included below, with further detail throughout the report.

Countries/places visited

Sweden

Sweden's youth justice model closely resembles the Secure Children's Home provision in England and Wales. All facilities that deprive children of liberty are run by Statens Institutions Styrelse (SiS), a government agency. Children are placed in these settings for reasons including psychosocial problems, substance misuse, or criminal behaviour.

Some are sentenced under the Secure Youth Care Act, while others are placed for welfare reasons.

SiS operates 22 sites with varying security levels, placing children based on risk and proximity to home. Many facilities include both high-security units and 'open' step-down units to support transitions. Therapeutic care is central, with on-site psychologists, nurses, family therapists, and strong links to local health services. Each site has a school and a head teacher, with a focus on helping children envision a positive future.

Due to Sweden's vast geography, children do have to be placed far from home. To support family engagement, sites provide family accommodation and fund travel costs.

The age of criminal responsibility is 15. Crimes by children under 15 are rarely investigated unless extremely serious, such as murder. Children deemed a danger to themselves, or others can be detained under welfare provisions.

SiS uses a staged approach, with children working toward goals that lead to reduced restrictions and greater community engagement. Step-down facilities enable access to community schools, internships, and preparation for reintegration.

The longest custodial sentence for 15–17-year-olds is four years, all served within the youth estate. Young people may remain in SiS facilities until age 21 to complete their sentences, with no transition to adult prisons.

Belgium

Belgium is widely regarded as the leading European model for youth justice, where youth crime is viewed through a child protection and public health lens. Children requiring secure accommodation remain under government oversight until age 18 to ensure continued care and support. Facilities offer varying levels of security and care, often within the same site, allowing children to progress without relocation.

Youth justice law varies across Belgium's regions. I visited a facility in the south, operated by Institutions Publiques de Protection de la Jeunesse (IPPJ), which runs facilities across both Flemish and French-speaking areas. The age of criminal responsibility is effectively 18, though children over 16 can be tried under criminal law in extreme cases. Those under 18 are dealt with in youth courts and may be placed in secure institutions under "educational measures." Placement in closed facilities is reserved for children aged 14+ and is not time-limited, with judges regularly reviewing cases. Youth jails for over-16s are rare, with only 10 places nationwide.

Transition and aftercare are central to Belgium's model. Gradual, carefully planned

transitions are prioritised, and children may remain in IPPJ institutions until age 20 to complete education or personal projects. Importantly, there is no transfer from children's institutions to adult prisons for those under 16.

Portugal

Portugal's youth justice system places education and reintegration at its core, with very few children in custody. There are six educational centres nationwide; three in Lisbon, one in central Portugal, and two in the north, focused on small, city-based units that prioritise values development and community engagement. As of October 2024, 168 beds were available (158 in use). The system offers open, semi-open, and closed placements depending on the child's needs and risks.

Youth internment is structured in four stages, with opportunities to attend school, college, or employment in the community. The age of criminal responsibility is 16, and no child under 16 retains a criminal record upon reaching adulthood, even if sentenced after 18. The maximum sentence is three years, with no transfer between youth and adult justice systems.

Transition planning is continuous. Community youth offending teams work closely with educational centres, setting individual goals and preparing children for reintegration. The final stage, the **intensive community support phase**, occurs entirely in the community with ongoing supervision. For children lacking suitable accommodation, an **autonomy house**, run by a partner organisation, offers transitional support.

New York

Since 2012, New York has replaced large juvenile justice facilities with smaller, community-based homes through the 'Close to Home' initiative. This reform, following the 2010 merger of the Department of Juvenile Justice into the Administration of Children's Services (ACS), has transformed youth justice in New York City, strengthening connections between young people, families, and communities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Placements are tiered by security level and delivered by organisations commissioned by ACS.

The USA has no national age of criminal responsibility, but New York's 'Raise the Age' reform ensures children under 18 are no longer prosecuted as adults. From age 12, cases are processed through family court, with criminal courts used only in extreme circumstances. The reform emphasises brain development research and prioritises evidence-based treatment over punitive incarceration (New York State, 2025).

Aftercare is integral to Close to Home. Staff engage families from day one, offering family interventions, social support, and ongoing help after a child's return home. Some programmes extend voluntary long-term support. Children do not transition to adult prisons and can remain in the programme until age 21.

Missouri

Missouri was the first USA state to replace large detention centres with smaller, community-based youth homes offering varying levels of security. The Division of Youth Services (DYS) runs regional residential and non-residential programs across five regions, with the vision that every young person will become a productive citizen (Division of Youth Services, 2024). Known internationally as a model of good practice, the Missouri Approach prioritises therapeutic youth development, early intervention, and prevention, alongside comprehensive treatment for those requiring secure accommodation.

The model emphasises group processes, youth-led values change, cognitive-behavioural interventions, and strong family involvement. Aftercare is a standard component, ensuring ongoing community integration. In 2023–2024, 577 youth were committed to DYS.

The age of full criminal responsibility is 18, but there is no minimum age for prosecution. In rare cases, children may be 'dual committed' with both juvenile and adult dispositions.

All DYS youth follow a four-level program:

1. Look, listen, and learn – orientation (about one week).
2. Self-discovery – contributing to group processes and treatment work.
3. Leadership – leading groups and supporting peers.
4. Transition and internalisation – preparing for reintegration.

Upon reaching Level 4, a transition meeting is held, and DYS submits a discharge plan to the courts. Only dual-committed youth can transition to adult prisons, and only with a judge's order.

AIM, METHOD, THEMES & FINDINGS

Aim

The aim of this Fellowship was to identify and visit international good-practice models of accommodation for young people who, because of their criminal activity, require placement out of the home in secure settings, and learn about their approach to time spent within the placement and any aftercare provision offered.

The goal was to experience these places and meet the people involved in running them/working within them, overseeing them and commissioning them, as well as speaking to the young people who receive their services, to see and understand how they operationalise the plentiful evidence-base around what young people need and sustain this within their wider contexts. Also to understand how this learning can improve time in custody and transitions out of custody for children and young people requiring secure accommodation in the UK.

Method

Given the nature of the settings where young people who have committed crimes are placed, it was essential to visit the facilities, meet staff, and engage with the young people living there. This experiential approach allowed me to immerse myself in daily practices, observe the environments, and understand how the models operate within their legal, socio-cultural, and political contexts.

Information was gathered through observation, interviews with facility staff and system leaders, and informal conversations with young people. Interviews were guided by pre-prepared themes but remained conversational. All participants were informed of the Fellowship's aims, and discussions, observations, and presentations were welcomed, with suggestions for further exploration encouraged.

Independent research into the legal context of youth justice in each country complemented these visits. The key themes identified are presented in the following sections of this report.

Themes and Findings

To provide an accessible and useful summary of the findings, these have been grouped based on identified themes across the places visited.

Close to home, small-scale facilities work best

“These children are not taken to some deserted place. They are from our community and stay in our community, and everyone retains responsibility for them.” Staff member, Bela Vista Educational Centre, Lisbon.

A key finding from the research is the effectiveness of small-scale facilities embedded within communities, allowing young people to stay close to their families. While this principle is recognised in England and Wales, many young people are placed far from home due to the limited number of facilities.

In Portugal, staff at all three Educational Centres (ECs) and the Autonomy House emphasised that proximity to home improves outcomes. Children can remain enrolled in local schools, access local services, and maintain family relationships, easing their transition post-release. For example, at EC Bela Vista, one youth was attending school in the community during the final stage of his internment, preparing for reintegration. I was able to speak to him on his return, alongside a staff member and both recognised that the aim is to prepare the boy for the challenges and temptations he will face when in the community and help him through navigating choice again. Another youth at EC Navarro de Paiva was attending university, returning to the centre each evening; the value of the EC's being in local communities meant this was a possibility for her, and meant she could continue her studies.

Similarly, in New York City, the Close to Home projects intend to keep children and young people from the city in the city. The whole purpose of the movement was to facilitate the involvement of families, close friends and other important people in the lives of these children, so often separated from those who they need most. Additionally, the staff at Barbara Blum noted that keeping boys in their communities also meant that they were being looked after by people from their communities; they looked like them, sounded like them, cooked food like their families and could relate to their experiences.

This was useful for engagement, both with the young people directly as well as their families who have often had hard time with state agencies. Small, home- like environments also reduce institutionalisation, creating therapeutic spaces that meet children's needs. This supports a therapeutic environment, relationship, and a chance to have their needs met, sometimes for the first time, within a group home environment. The staff at Barbara Blum were proud that the house the boys were living in looked like any other house, on any residential street, and their bedrooms looked like bedrooms and not cells.

Missouri shares this approach. Close to home, small scale facilities are fundamental to the model they use within the Division of Youth Services (hereafter DYS). Family and community engagement is at the heart of the therapeutic approach and model across all levels of care (ranging from non-secure residential care, moderate care and secure care). It was clear to the researcher throughout the visits that took place, across the whole spectrum of services and placements on offer that this was genuine.

One staff member within the service noted that children need “**good environments where they feel physically safe and emotionally safe**” for successful therapeutic care and positive outcomes.



Picture of Langsford House Boys Home, Lee Summit, MO, Image Credit: Google Maps

In Sweden and Belgium, while facilities require clear security measures (e.g., fencing), efforts are made to ensure the spaces feel welcoming and homely. For example, SiS Raby in Lund and SiS Klarälvsgården are close to town centres, allowing youth to work or intern in the community. At IPPJ Saint Servais in Belgium, community-based services, such as specialist therapy and volunteering, are actively integrated into young people’s rehabilitation.

Rescaled Europe, a non-governmental organisation advocating for small, community-based alternatives to traditional prisons, echoes these findings. It argues that removing people to large institutions isolates them and reduces their ability to reintegrate effectively.

Challenges include the risk of absconding and occasional resistance from local communities, requiring strong public relations and community engagement. One staff member at EC Navarro de Pavia in Lisbon described their director, Mr Jose Amaro, “**A master of Public Relations**”, recognising that a lot goes into getting the community on side, particularly if an incident occurs.



Picture of SiS ungdomshem Klarälvsgården, Image Credit: Eleanor Hinchliffe



Picture of Good Shepherds Services, Barbara Blum House. Image credit Google Maps

“These programmes work. Young people don’t get used to being in closed facilities far away - we are reducing the risk of institutionalisation and the trauma that closed, isolated, large scale correctional facilities bring”. Staff member, Barbara Blum NSP, Brooklyn, NYC.

Education is fundamental to time spent in any form of secure placement

Education emerged as a fundamental element across all countries visited. Many children entering secure care have long histories of disengagement from school, yet, with proper support, they thrive. In Portugal, education is the primary purpose of placement within ECs, focusing not only on academics but also on values development. Across the three educational centres visited, there was multiple opportunities to engage in activities such as dancing, sports, library exchange, gym, tap dancing, basketball, football, swimming, and opportunities for volunteering in the local community (depending on phase). I was able to hear about and see pictures of the youth from one EC’s trip to a local primary school where they delivered an origami workshop. The director described how the youth felt overwhelmed with the connection and experience. It was moving to see the commitment and action to not excluding these youth from society, whilst also not excusing their crimes.

The director explained (summary quote) **“We want to show them that people are good, and not always bad, to help develop their personal and social responsibilities. We want them to know they are good too.”**

This EC reported an 11% recidivism rate, illustrating the success of this approach. Belgium follows a similar philosophy, with youth attending school during the week and, where possible, returning home on weekends. At IPPJ Saint Servais, I observed a vibrant, inclusive educational environment where young people took pride in their learning. Whilst the school area within the closed part of the facility was more limited in terms of the space, however girls still spoke about the value of learning and showed me, with pride, their artwork.

Missouri provides 30 hours of education weekly and one of the fundamentals of the Missouri Model of youth justice is “Integrated Treatment and Education”. Teachers are part of each young person’s treatment team, ensuring a holistic approach. Vocational training and high school diplomas are prioritised, and day-treatment centres offer intensive educational and therapeutic support as an alternative to residential programmes.

During my visit to one of the day treatment centres, I spoke with a young person who had clarity and hope around his future goals, and a clear understanding of the route he needed to take to get there. It was also clear he believed and trusted that the staff around him would help him achieve these goals and that, as another young person stated, **“The future is a possibility”**.

The day treatment programme I visited is run out of the main government building in Kansas City, and there is a strong focus on both education and general welfare. Staff recognised that often the wider worries young people have, have been the reason they are unable to engage effectively in education.

For example, youth can be picked up from home if needed to ensure attendance, they can access sanitary items, clothes and food on site. There is a recognition that youth can find it hard to ask for this sort of help, and it is in pursuit of providing for their families that they may choose criminal activity, therefore it is important that they know their needs will be predicted and met by trusted adults so they can focus on treatment.

New York's Close to Home facilities send youth to repurposed school buildings in the community and youth are taught by local teachers, preparing them for reintegration while reducing institutionalisation.

Across all settings, discharge planning aligns with school terms or educational milestones, underscoring the priority placed on education. Staff repeatedly emphasised that when youth receive the right support, they engage positively and succeed.



Picture of one of the girls' homes, IPPJ Saint Servais, Belgium, Image Credit: Eleanor Hinchliffe

What struck me was that all places reported that children engaged well with school, they enjoyed it and typically behaviour was good. This is similar to my experience within secure accommodation in the UK. It is useful to consider that when the support is in place, often these children can thrive. Throughout all settings, there was a recognition that young people need structure, routine, movement and predictable support within their school day to effectively engage.

In Portugal, EC Navarro de Paiva enables young people to attend local schools and even university, despite the risks and challenges.

As well as the young person who was able to go to university, another girl was also able to maintain her place at high school as it was close to the centre. The director recognised that this is a huge risk reputationally but that it is the best thing for the child.

In 2024, they have had six children go to school or college outside of the centre and have supported children to continue other activities such as one young man who was going to rugby practice in the community three times a week. There was a clear commitment, ethically as well as in how the centre operationally functioned, to ensuring that time spent in the educational centre was supportive and proactive rather than ‘freezing young people in time’.

Similar challenges to those that I am aware of anecdotally within the SCH sector in England and Wales exist, particularly regarding offering a curriculum to a large age range, with multiple and complex learning and behavioural needs. Centres described trying to meet the educational needs of youth, some of which had aged out of standard ‘school’ or had completed high school, alongside younger children.

Indeed, in Missouri, I was privileged to meet two young men within one of the secure facilities who had completed their high school diploma and been able to graduate whilst in placement. They were then spending their education time completing vocational courses and careers research. Both boys demonstrated hope for their future, which one of them commented was due to the time he had spent in the facility. He noted (summary quote, not direct):

“Before I came here, I thought my life was a 15-year stretch in prison or that I’d be dead... now I have my GED, I’m looking at real estate courses and have hope for my future... DYS did that”.

In Sweden and Portugal, staff emphasised that trusting relationships, particularly with teachers, are crucial. Many young people have experienced disrupted schooling and broken trust with authority figures, requiring patience, skill, and empathy to re-engage them meaningfully.

Family is vital to the treatment process

A consistent theme across all countries visited was the recognition that family involvement is essential to a young person’s rehabilitation. Time in placement was viewed as an opportunity to strengthen or repair family ties, with services intentionally designed to make this possible. While this principle is understood within the youth justice system in England and Wales, the difference lies in how other countries operationalise it.

In Sweden, both facilities I visited offered on-site family accommodation and covered transport costs where needed.

Family therapy was a standard part of treatment, ensuring that parents understood their child's progress and how to support them upon return. As a staff member at SiS Raby noted:

“Important is working with family, reconnecting with family even if parents struggle. We welcome the families into the centre, we have rooms for them to stay and for siblings to come too. Connection is important. Raby will sort it out if the parent does not have the economic means to come as they encourage these connections and support the families to know their child and be with their child through this journey. Children can also visit home (where appropriate), and they are encouraged to regularly talk on the phone.”



Picture of view from SiS Klarälvsgården, including home where families can stay. Image Credit: Eleanor Hinchliffe

In Portugal, during the intensive supervision phase, young people live with their families where possible, or within the Autonomy House if they cannot go home, with ongoing support from youth justice workers and educational centre staff. Families are actively prepared for reunification or improved relationships through home visits, overnight stays, and direct interventions. Staff at the Autonomy House summarised their approach:

“The main thing is that the family feel they have people to turn to if they are stuck.”

Additional support in the form of programmes for families around parental competencies is also offered by the educational centres, and whilst there are limits on visiting times and phone calls, staff are committed to ensuring that youth do get visits from parents and are regularly connecting with them via phone.

The Close to Home projects in New York City also emphasise family engagement from the outset. Case Planners work directly in family homes before and after discharge, connecting families with services, addressing wider needs, and building confidence in parenting. Family therapy is provided as standard. Staff stressed the importance of shifting parents' perceptions:

“We’re not correctional officers. We’re here to care for your child, not to punish them.”

It is recognised that this will hopefully mean that the youth return to a home where the multiple needs of the family are being addressed, so the youth does not have to feel the same level of responsibility for the whole family on discharge. Important is also helping the parent feel more confident in their ability to meet their child's needs. There is an understanding that it might have been hard at times to parent their child and there is a curiosity about what it has been like to be a parent and what the parent hopes for from the future. Indeed, Barabara Blum use the Missouri Model, and one of the fundamentals of the model is “families and communities as partners in treatment”; highlighting that families need to be engaged in treatment as soon as the youth enters a programme, alongside the engagement in family therapy for all families.

In the words of a staff member from Barabara Blum **“We want the youth to be able to be a youth”**.

Regular family events, such as meals, games, and holiday activities, help build trust and connection. One staff member at Barbara Blum described the transformative effect:

“Once the parent starts to heal, the child starts to heal, and they can forgive each other. Let’s talk, let’s eat, let’s laugh – sometimes they haven’t had this together for a long time. Everything has been about them being bad. It improves the child’s self- worth and self-esteem to be recognised as good by their parent and other adults and for their parents and other adults to enjoy them just as they are in a non- transactional way”.

Missouri DYS Treatment Beliefs

Safety and structure are the foundation of treatment – Meeting youth's basic needs and providing physical and emotional safety is the foundation of treatment. Youth need to know that staff cares enough about them to expect them to succeed. This is demonstrated by staff's ability to provide safety and structure.

Each person is special and unique – Services and supports are individualized. Through this process youth recognize the value and strengths of self and others, and are challenged and inspired to reach their full potential.

People Can Change – While change is often difficult and naturally leads to resistance and fear, people more readily embrace change when included in the process. Youth need to be guided and supported to try new behaviors, practice, succeed, and learn from mistakes as they internalize positive changes.

People desire to do well and succeed – All youth need approval, acceptance and the opportunity to contribute. Programs and services are structured in a manner that taps into and builds upon these universal needs.

Emotions are not to be judged – Feelings are not right or wrong. Personal disclosure and reconciliation of life experiences are important for healing and personal growth. As a part of the treatment process youth explore behaviors, thoughts, and emotions.

All behavior has a purpose and is often a symptom of unmet needs – Challenging behavior is often symptomatic of core issues or patterns. Services are designed to help address these needs and assist youth in investigating and understanding their history, behavior, healthy alternatives, and facilitate internalized change.

People do the best they can with the resources available to them – Youth often come to the agency with limited resources and a lack of knowledge and awareness of their behavioral and emotional options. In the situations they have experienced, their behavior may have seemed logical and understandable.

The family is vital to the treatment process – Families want the best for their children. Services provided to youth must take into account the values and behaviors established within the family system. Family expertise and participation is essential in the youth's treatment process, and facilitates system change within the youth's family.

True understanding is built on genuine empathy and care – Respect and appreciation for the inherent worth and dignity of self and others forms the foundation of safety, trust, and openness necessary for change to occur. Demonstrating respect and appreciation for the worth of youth and families is essential.

We are more alike than different – Everyone has fears, insecurities, and basic needs including safety, attention, and belonging. Programs and staff normalize and attend to these needs, assisting youth in meeting their needs in positive and productive ways.

Change does not occur in isolation – Youth need others. Treatment is structured to assist youth in experiencing success through helping others and being helped. This need is also addressed through accessing community resources and enabling youth to develop healthy supportive relationships with peers, adults, family, and in their neighborhoods and communities.

We are a combination of our past and present – Youth have learned through a wide variety of experiences. It is through investigation and linking past and present experiences that youth develop the knowledge, skills and emotional capacity to succeed in home and community.

Respect and embrace diversity – Services, supports, and interactions demonstrate respect for and build on the values, preferences, beliefs, culture, and identity of the youth, family, and community. Diversity in expression, opinion, and preference is embraced.

Picture of the DYS Treatment Beliefs, displayed at the DYS Head Office, Jefferson City
Image Credit: Eleanor Hinchliffe

Therapeutic community and environments create safety and change, not just therapy

“Treatment happens when children feel safe”. Staff member, Barbara Blum, NYC.

Across facilities in Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, New York, and Missouri, staff and youth emphasised that meaningful preparation for the future comes not from individual therapy alone, but from creating a therapeutic, safe, and emotionally attuned environment. The entire experience within the facility must reflect care, structure, and an understanding of each child’s needs.

Language and Culture of Care

As touched upon earlier, language is an important part of establishing a therapeutic culture. In Sweden, children are sent to SiS for rehabilitation and treatment, not for punishment or retribution. The whole goal of the placement is to offer healing and development for children for their next step, so they are best prepared for the rest of their lives. The future is always what is worked towards and spoken about. Hope is paramount and the centres take responsibility for ensuring that hope is held.

Jonathan Eliasson, director of SiS Klarälvsgården explained:

“The problem is, these children, they have no hopes and dreams; they believe they will be dead by 25 due to a life of crime, so they have nothing to lose but also nothing to strive for. They describe themselves as the walking dead- they cannot think about a future that they do not believe they will have.”

In Belgium, children are sent to IPPJ for education and not sentenced for a ‘crime’. This is the same in Portugal. In NYC a youth will be ‘placed’, again for therapeutic support and rehabilitation not punishment. In Missouri, children are placed in the care of the DYS rather than sentenced to custody.

In contrast, UK law uses punitive terms - “sentenced,” “custody,” “detention” - which influences how youth perceive their time in care and their relationships with staff.

Safety Through Relationships and Structure

Alongside language, the importance of safety being created in and through relationships was stressed in all sites visited. During my visit to SiS Klarälvsgården, Jonathan Eliasson spoke in detail about how to develop safety in relationships with the boys in his care, some of whom had committed some of the most violent and extreme crimes in the country. He described ensuring himself and the staff demonstrated they were holding the boys in mind.

This is one of the most effective interventions for managing and supporting the boys in the home and achieving the goal of them feeling like they have a future and thus engaging with the programme and beyond. He described this as supporting empathy development, for each other and the staff, and this, in turn, reduced violence across the home. This then applies to their time spent in the community if they can be supported to develop similarly supportive relationships.

Jonathan offered an example of the purposeful actions he takes to create an environment whereby everyone feels held in mind; he described that he would make a phone call to a boy before a visit he has been worrying about to see how he's feeling and then make a point of checking in afterwards.

“Often these boys have not been kept in mind or been checked on or have adults around them able to demonstrate that they care about them no matter what. A lot of their previous experiences have been transactional – you do something for me; I’ll do something for you. We must see him as a child, first.” Director, SiS Klarälvsgården.

Similarly in Sweden, routine, activity, and a lack of idle time was important in creating a therapeutic environment. It was noted that many children who have committed crimes have experienced significant trauma throughout their lives. To support recovery from trauma, a predictable environment, routine and response from staff is important and the homes are designed to offer this. Children always know what is coming next and what the expectations of them are.

Treatment programmes and groups are embedded into the daily routine and are not optional. All children must see the psychologist a minimum of 5 times. It is then their choice if they want to continue seeing them after that, however due to the way the offer is embedded into the daily routine, there are good engagement rates. This supports both assessment and direct therapeutic intervention with young people, as well as the psychologist being able to support the wider home, including education and the programmes team in supporting the youth.

The value of an environment and structure that is conducive to recovery was summarised nicely by one staff member at Raby:

“If you prepare children for the worst through the environment they are placed in, they will become the worst thing”.

Similarly, one of the beliefs of the Missouri Model utilised in both the Close to Home projects in New York, as well as in DYS is “safety and structure are the foundations for development”, recognising that youth need to know that staff care about them enough to expect them to succeed. This also relates to the above description of the fundamental importance of family, as this belief in the youth is something the staff must also support the parent to feel and believe.

Additionally, the importance of “**safety through supervision, structure and relationships**” is one of the fundamentals of the Missouri Approach. This means having staff who are well trained and culturally diverse, as well as ensuring constant and active supervision of youth 24/7. Alongside this, a highly structured schedule, including group meetings, school and activities helps build responsibility and supports engagement. One staff member at Barabara Blum summarised this fundamental as: “**eyes on, ears on, hearts on**”.

Purposeful Activity and Exposure

As touched upon above, the availability of education, vocational training and community engagement, plus always working towards defined and achievable goals also adds to a supportive and therapeutic environment. These factors were evident in all places visited and staff and young people spoke to the value of them.

Facilities integrate education, vocational training, and enriching experiences to broaden children’s perspectives. As staff at SiS Raby noted: “**They need to see the forest, they need to see the beach, they need to experience the theatre**”.

Often children who require secure accommodation may not have had access to these enriching experiences which reduces their ability to see a better or brighter future for themselves. Alongside education, community engagement, safety in relationships with staff and developing and healing family connections, young people can start to believe in themselves and their futures.



Picture of Watkins Mill Park Camp, Lawson, MO. Image credit Eleanor Hinchliffe

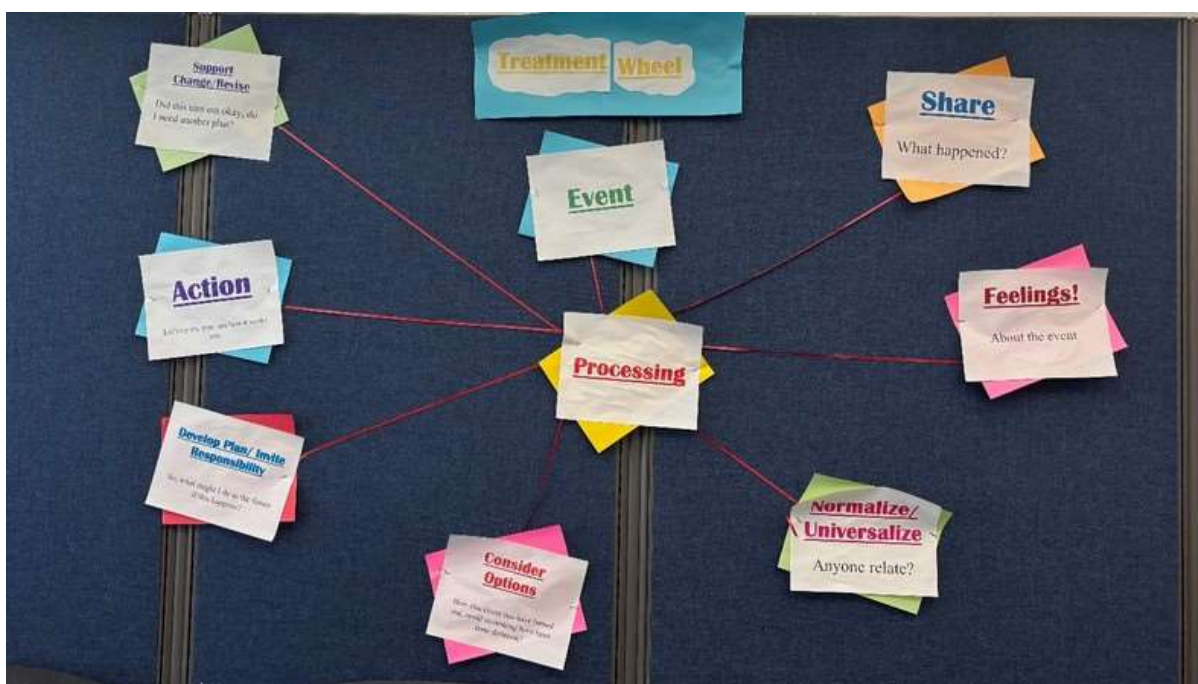
Therapeutic Approaches

Regarding specific therapeutic approaches, the majority of places visited did use specific models, embedded within all interactions and plans. Group processing - helping youth reflect on their past, present, and future in a safe, peer-supported environment - was common.

Missouri's approach integrates positive youth development and cognitive-behavioural therapy within small, stable groups and nurturing environments. Importantly, these components are delivered to youth in a fully integrated treatment team approach that are learned and practiced across all parts of the placements. What makes this effective is that **"youth stay together in small groups with the same staff and are treated in a humane and nurturing environment"** (MYSI, no date).

During my visits Barbara Blum as well as all facilities within Missouri, I was able to join 'circling up', which is an approach taken to bring the group together at certain times and includes all people within the group. Youth and staff are encouraged to share experiences in this space, and I observed it to be an effective tool in managing group dynamics and creating a sense of 'team'. I was also able to see some of the work that had been produced during their treatment sessions, focused on different things based on where they were in the programme and what it had been agreed they would focus on as part of their individualised placement plan.

To respect the privacy of the young people I will not describe the pieces in detail, but themes included artwork representing the hopes for the future or depicting their developing understanding of their identity and values. Youth produced these in set treatment sessions and are encouraged to share these with their group peers. They are encouraged to relate to each other's experience and offer support to help each other develop.



Day Treatment Centre, Kansas City, MO . Image credit Eleanor Hinchliffe

Similarly, family therapy was offered as standard in Sweden, New York and Missouri. And as above, in Sweden all children must meet with a psychologist at least five times and are offered (and often take up) ongoing regular therapy throughout their stay.

Importantly however, in all settings visited, any individual work was always integrated into the rest of the treatment programmes and regular treatment team meetings were held in facilities to ensure consistency in the support being offered to the child. This also means staff can role model different communication strategies or support the use of different coping strategies, for example. There was a real sense of purpose in all interactions for children whilst in secure care, to maximise the impact of the time.

In Sweden, treatment plans are utilised, and a great deal of time go into these. Important is helping staff understand the focus for each child and the developed plan. Programmes are then developed in consultation with social workers and psychologists and delivered by the programme's officers. Unit staff are deeply involved to ensure lessons are practiced in daily life.

Summarised nicely by a member of the Programmes team at SiS Raby:

"We are not just holding these children; we are treating them. Lessons are not isolated, they are integrated – all those who work with the child will know what he/she is focusing on and will role model this and support them to think about how they integrate parts of the programme into other parts- they must practice their new skills."

Within IPPJ Saint Servais, the main therapy was equine therapy, alongside group processing approaches. All girls are offered equine therapy, and the horses live on site (five horses and two donkeys). I was privileged to speak to a girl before her session and she explained that the girls really value it, often finding it easier to be with animals than talk directly about their experiences. The staff reported a very good take-up and all girls can access this, regardless of security level.



Picture of horse used for Equine Therapy at IPPJ Saint Servais, Belgium Image Credit Eleanor Hinchliffe

Within Portugal's EC's, they use phased and progressive programming using the following structure, alongside relationship-based practice: integration (up to 30 days), acquisition, consolidation and autonomy. Of note, Portugal have limited access to child and adolescent mental health services and professionals, and their treatment plans are led by the staff in the home, made up of tutors, social workers and psychologists.

Progression is based on the duration of the period of internment and pro-social behaviour. Importantly the plan is made from arrival with the community team involved, led by the tutors within the EC. The autonomy part can be spent in the community or with intensive support with family. This is a fundamental part of transition and therefore the EC staff remain heavily involved. Intensive supervision is for a minimum of three months and the longest is six months and the juvenile team and social services work closely with the family to prepare. This is to avoid a 'cliff edge' of leaving the EC.

Integrated within the stepped care used in Portugal is the recognition that relationship is important, alongside the development of trust and the child receiving positive attention and that rules, activity, noticing and affection are all therapeutic. A staff member at EC Padre Antonio de Oliveira said:

"We should treat people with respect and then we can demand this back by words and acts. We must realise and accept that children come to us angry, and over time they will learn that they don't need to be in the war with everyone".

Movement was also outlined as extremely important to supporting the children in the ECs. The young people regularly take part in yoga and Taii-Chi, recognising this is important for regulation. A staff member in Bela Vista EC noted, **"Movement is important for all the work we do with children"**.

Within Barbara Blum, there is a real commitment to the ethos that children who are getting in trouble with the law require support and treatment and not correction, and that it is the responsibility of all staff to be involved in the therapeutic support. Everyone is responsible for engaging in the group process and role modelling. Every single minute of the day is planned for, as above, recognising that purposeful activity is treatment. There is always a time/need to role model through conversations and activity.

The staff work hard to work out the needs of the group, and then they plan each topic throughout the week. Social workers are embedded into the group, and they will notice what the focus needs to be for the young person and how things are developing. All youth meet with the social worker individually, so they can then pick up on what the youth may need to work on in their individual sessions (note in US, social workers are often licensed to deliver therapy and are trained to do so). The hope through this is that the young person is getting consistent messaging, across all parts of their treatment. The group process also gives the chance for youth to understand that when you do something, there are repercussions for lots of people,

including peers, family and communities.



Picture of IPPJ Saint Servais, Belgium Image Credit Eleanor Hinchliffe

It is also recognised that often youth will listen to each other before they listen to staff. Through using the ‘circling up’ approach, they can notice and process where individuals are at, how the group is feeling and what they are working towards. Additionally, if one of the groups does something wrong, then the whole group is impacted, with the aim to show and experience first-hand the consequences of another’s negative actions to build empathy.

“We hope to instil some sense of responsibility, without any shame”. Staff member, Barbara Blum.

“What is important is the predictability and availability of adults – this creates a safe environment. Once they feel safe and have some sense of the response they will get if they open up, they will start to do this. They also see the other boys doing this too and this makes them feel safer to do it as often they’ve had similar experiences”. Staff member, Barbara Blum.

They also use the Sanctuary model for trauma informed practice, keeping in mind the fundamental question that drives staff: **“How do we make them feel safe and how can we help them understand and express their feelings and what is going on for them so that we can support them to develop other ways of dealing with this outside of criminal activity”.**

Other approaches used is the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (Hoge & Andrews, 2011) to support case management and intervention planning, and credible messenger mentoring. This involves using individuals with shared life experiences, including prior involvement in the justice system, who leverage their own journey of transformation to connect with youth, build trust and promote positive change. Indeed, two of the staff members at Barbara Blum have been in the programme themselves previously.

“Children do well when they have somebody to disappoint or make proud. We want to show them that not all adults are terrible, and they are not terrible either. You can be both good and have done some bad things.” Staff member, Barbara Blum

Very similarly, within DYS in Missouri, there was a strong commitment to ensuring the environment was both trauma-informed and trauma-integrated. A trauma-integrated environment is a space, whether physical or within a system of care, where trauma-informed principles are consistently applied to create a safe, supporting and empowering setting. It is recognised that this can be extremely difficult within the youth justice space, but DYS are committed to promoting policies, procedures and practices that are actively resisting re-traumatisation and promote healing and recovery through safety and collaboration.

Important parts of this are staff not wearing uniforms and being referred to as their first names, as well as well looked after environments; **“If kids walk into an environment that is valued, they will value it”**

Similarly, ensuring staff are looked after and supported, to hold their position as leader within the group and not just there to watch children, is vitally important.

Looking after staff is imperative to effective care

Building therapeutic, trauma-informed, and relationship-based youth justice environments depends on well-trained, compassionate, and well-supported staff. The Secure Stairs framework in England and Wales recognises this by providing training and supervision, though challenges remain due to the correctional nature of the youth custody system.

It was interesting to find out how settings that are effectively delivering therapeutic environments and care support their staff, to maintain this.

In SiS Raby and SiS Klarälvsgården (Sweden), leaders emphasize **“holding hope”** for staff, helping them see the impact of their work through reflective supervision and transparent culture. Programme staff have direct experience working on units, giving them empathy for frontline challenges and the patience required to respond to children with compassion.

At IPPJ Saint Servais (Belgium), staff highlighted the emotional impact of managing self-harm incidents. Team-building efforts, open communication, and regular supervision are essential for their sense of safety and resilience.

Barbara Blum (NYC) extends trauma-informed care to staff. On appointment, staff create personal safety plans to manage triggers and coping strategies. Incidents are reviewed as learning opportunities rather than shaming exercises, and successes are celebrated. Leadership models this supportive approach, acknowledging that the work can be emotionally challenging.

All facilities noted the difficulty of recruiting the right staff, particularly post-COVID when remote work is not an option. Barbara Blum leadership ensures unsuitable staff are redirected to other roles within the organization. They also focus on staff morale, incentives, and fair compensation to prevent burnout:

“The main focus for staff is incentive, morale, acknowledgement, informal and formal support and supervision happening consistently, and the sense that they’re never alone with a problem. We recognise that staff need to feel safe at work and then it trickles down to the kids, so they feel safe too. We make sure staff are part of all activities, these are family based, and we want to demonstrate respect and care at all levels.”

In Missouri’s DYS, leaders recognise that staff sometimes enter the field due to personal experiences, which can be valuable but also risky without proper supervision. Staff undergo over 200 hours of training in their first year, covering trauma-informed care, group models, and specialised interventions. Most hold at least a bachelor’s degree, while teachers are fully qualified professionals. Family specialists and therapists provide additional expertise, ensuring a highly skilled workforce.

Commitment to effective transition and aftercare as fundamental

I chose to visit Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, New York (Close to Home), and Missouri due to their strong international reputations in youth justice and notably low recidivism rates. A common theme across all these locations was the commitment to transition planning and aftercare, ensuring that young people do not face a “cliff edge” upon discharge.

Sweden (SiS Raby and SiS Klarälvsgården)

In Sweden, the entire stay is viewed as part of the transition process. Each child receives a timeline outlining their journey, including gradual reintroduction to community life - such as practicing everyday skills like taking a bus or ordering at a shop. Decisions about reintegration are flexible, tailored to the child’s readiness.

While SiS has no legal authority to remain involved post-discharge, community services intensify their support during the final stage of placement. Staff emphasise that children don’t leave “fixed”; transition and aftercare are critical for sustaining progress. Youth can call the facility for advice, and staff guide them using strategies learned during the programme. As one staff member noted:

“Putting a child here is not a quick fix; it is the start of the journey.”

Belgium (IPPJ)

In Belgium, courts retain oversight until a youth turns 18, ensuring that no child is discharged without a school, address, and transition plan. Discharge planning involves preparing youth for autonomy after highly structured environments. Residential schools, family reintegration with intensive support, and community activities like sports and clubs are core elements of the plan. It is important that the girl understands where she is going, who will be looking after her, work through any concerns the girl has about the move and to forward plan for challenges that might occur.

This is in recognition of the fact that whilst children are in secure accommodation, everything is determined for them; what time they wake up, when they have breakfast, going to school, sanctions for not following the rules, but on transition this level of control will not be in place and girls need supporting to learn how to manage having autonomy again.

Portugal (Educational Centres)

Portugal includes an “intensive community support phase” as the final step. Youth may transition home or move to the Autonomy House. I was privileged to visit the autonomy house during my time in Lisbon. Run by a partner organisation, Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa, which is a community organisation who work in partnership with the ministry of justice to provide placements for children who are in the final part of the educational measure. The autonomy house functions much like a foster placement/supported living.

There are three flats with staff on site 24/7. Children can move there from aged 15 to 21 and will be placed there if intensive supervision with family is not the right thing for them. Similarly to the UK, it is recognised that 80-90% of young people who are placed in educational centres have had social services involvement and 50-60% have been in social care prior to moving to the ECs. Once a child has completed their measure, they have the option of moving into one of Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa’s foster care placements, which are in the same building and they can remain there up to 25 years old, if a judge allows.

The main approach used within the autonomy house is relationship-based practice. Staff are not able to use restraint or restrict liberty. Staff described the importance of knowing the children in their care, creating a predictable environment and response and that this manages the behaviour.

It was outlined that some children would rather stay in the EC than move to the autonomy house, as there are high expectations and this can be challenging. As outlined by the leader of the Autonomy House “**liberty is very painful**”.

Similar support is offered to the family throughout the intensive community support

phase and a bed is always kept for the child at the EC

This is to support parents and staff at the Autonomy House, as well as the young person, feel supported and clear that support is available if needed.

The Educational Centres remain involved for up to 25 months post-discharge, ensuring continuity of care, psychiatric follow-up, and social services support:

“From the first day, we prepare them, and those around them, for the last day.”

Staff member, EC Padre Antonio de Oliveira.

New York (Barbara Blum – Close to Home Projects)

Aftercare planning starts at intake, with staff working closely with families and child welfare agencies. Discharge is delayed until appropriate accommodation and school placements are secured:

“If they don’t have a school placement identified, they won’t be leaving.”

Safety is prioritised, youth may avoid certain areas due to gang activity, and staff assist in planning safe routes to school. Ideally, a child begins attending community school one month before discharge to smooth the transition.

Case Study – Child A:

A youth who excelled during placement suddenly stopped attending school after discharge. Through supervision and curiosity, staff learned he couldn’t afford a haircut and felt embarrassed to attend school. With financial and emotional support, he resumed attendance:

“When you care enough to understand the reasons, you can pitch your intervention in the right place.”

Missouri (DYS)

Missouri’s DYS prioritises **“productive discharge”**, with a 91% success rate in 2024. Aftercare includes education, vocational support, family reintegration, and ongoing treatment. The DYS can bring almost any youth back into residential care on a temporary basis (up to 30 days) if they falter on aftercare status, or with an appropriate hearing, they can be compelled to complete another residential stay. Staff maintain ongoing, personal contact to ensure youth have a trusted adult:

“What would you want if it was your child who was the next one through the door?”

– DYS leadership.

Staff at DYS report good relationships with children’s services which supports transition, and the previous Director of DYS now sits across both agencies.

As in the UK, there can be some tensions regarding whether a child should sit in Justice or Care, however the court does have the power to commit the child to both agencies which forces them to work together to find a solution for the child that is long term.

Discharge destinations for children after a stay in a DYS facility include going home to family, specialist foster care, transitional housing, kinship care, possibly military service or residential school, or independent living with support. There are also occasions where children may move to a mental health placement. The director outlined that he could think of no examples where they have not managed to find something appropriate for a child, and they will stay at the DYS facility until this is found, and a proper transition takes place. However, it is noted that this can take an extended period of time, and requires the collaboration of DYS's sister agency, Children's Division, in an effort to identify an appropriate permanency option.

There is a recognition across all settings that it is important to use the time in secure accommodation to advocate both for the youth and their families. Much like in the UK, we see that if someone is not well enough, or strong enough to push access for services, they risk not getting them. The children and families that come to be involved in the youth justice system have often had negative experiences with the state or services and need support and advocacy to ensure these are in place for them moving through life.

Differentiated accommodation options and Step-Down provision

All the countries I visited - Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, New York, and Missouri - offer differentiated security levels and step-down options. These approaches reduce institutionalisation, promote reintegration, and motivate youth to engage with programmes by providing clear pathways to less restrictive environments.

Examples of Differentiated Care

Sweden (SiS): Facilities range from high-security (e.g., SiS klarälvsgården) to lower- security units like SiS Raby. In the final third of placement, children transition to open units, where they have door fobs, access to internships, community schools, and personal phones. Staff encourage youth to spend time in the community, build independence, and “**mess up**” in a supported environment. As one staff member noted, “**The more we expose them to society, the better**”

Portugal: Three security levels: open, semi-open, and closed - all exist on the same sites. The final “intensive support” phase includes living with family or at the Autonomy House, with a bed kept open at the EC for return if needed, alongside significant support

Belgium (IPPJ Saint Servais): Regimes range from closed placements to open

placements, including day programmes for education

New York (Close to Home): Offers secure and non-secure placements tailored to risk and need

- **Missouri (DYS):** Uses a tiered system: group homes, moderate care, secure facilities, and day treatment - with youth placed alongside peers with similar needs and stay lengths, improving group cohesion and programme effectiveness

Other considerations

Whilst I was visiting each country, I also noticed several differences between their system and the system in place in the UK.

Systems outside the UK generally favour longer placements combined with step-down transitions:

- **Sweden:** A minimum of one year, with 18–24 months seen as optimal
- **Portugal:** Maximum 48 months (even for serious crimes)
- **New York:** Average 18-month “docket” split between placement and aftercare
- **Missouri:** 12–18 months in secure care, 6–9 months in moderate care, with flexible aftercare
- **Belgium:** Measures often start with 3 months but are reviewed regularly by a judge

Crucially, facilities can adjust timelines to align with educational transitions, reducing disruption. None of the countries transition youth directly from juvenile to adult custody, although Missouri permits “dual commitments,” allowing transfer to adult corrections if necessary. It was also recognised that very short sentences were not effective.

Shared challenges

Rising Violence and Gang Involvement

Within Sweden the increase in gangs and the use of younger children within these was noted as a challenge, particularly the fact that organised crime gangs were now exploiting children under 15 to commit very serious crimes, as they knew they could not be prosecuted under Swedish law. There was also a huge increase in gun crime. This has led to some pressure for the expansion of SiS justice facilities to create more beds.

Statistics were provided to me to outline the extent of the growing issue with gang crime and criminal exploitation: in 2017 there were 12 crimes investigated by someone under 15 and in 2023, it has been over 50. There were 38 children over 15 in 2017 with charges against them, rising to 140 in 2023. The increase in the severity of violence being committed by children was noted across all places visited, as well as the age of children coming into custody reducing.

There has also been a significant increase in girls involved in gangs, and some of the challenges of caring for girls in institutions is difficult as many have experienced significant trauma, have co-existing mental health needs and self-harm is more frequent.

Complex Needs

Youth now present with more complex mental health issues, addiction, and neurodiversity. Group-based interventions - key to many programmes - are harder to deliver with such diverse needs.

- **Mental Health Care Gaps:** Sweden, Belgium, and Portugal face significant challenges accessing child psychiatric services, both in custody and post-release. In Sweden, reduced investment in child psychiatry makes community follow-up difficult
- **Borderline Cases:** Many young people have severe psychological distress but do not meet hospital admission criteria, leaving facilities like IPPJ or EC's struggling to balance their needs alongside the wider population. Portugal and Missouri report the same issue

These challenges closely mirror those in the UK, especially for young people placed under Section 25 of the Children's Act (welfare orders), who often require both mental health support and restrictions for safety.

Staffing

Staffing challenges were evident across all settings, though the nature of these challenges varied. In Sweden, there are challenges in helping staff fully understand their roles. Staff are trained with an emphasis on trauma-informed care: **"When you can understand that the behaviour is caused by trauma, it helps staff to understand the behaviour and support it."**

A minimum age of 25 is required to work at SiS. Staff often need support in finding the right balance - some feel their role is to punish, while others lean towards being a friend. Ongoing guidance is needed to help them maintain professional yet supportive relationships.

In Portugal, both across the EC's and community juvenile justice teams there are significant staffing issues. Beds have had to be closed at times when staffing levels have been too low. This has led to waiting lists for placements, at times.

In New York, recruiting, training, and retaining staff is a persistent challenge, with a strong focus on hiring the right people. The high cost of living in NYC means many staff members are forced to work multiple jobs. As leadership noted: **"I am losing staff because I can't get staff."** Low pay is a recurring issue which the director of Barbara Blum is working to address. The role itself is demanding and often emotionally challenging, with significant impacts when things do not go as planned.

In Missouri, DYS leadership outlined the challenges of finding teachers who wanted to work within the settings, as well as loss of historical knowledge as more experienced staff retired and/or moved on. Important was succession planning and training for the future.

Conclusions

Delivering youth custody services that meet the needs of justice involved young people is a challenge, nationally and internationally. The balance of ensuring security and safety for young people, families and the wider public, as well as creating environments that do what the youth justice service hope to achieve, which is rehabilitation and a reduction in reoffending, is a difficult one.

As outlined throughout this report, the children who enter the youth justice system have experienced multiple traumas, significant disadvantage and have more often than not, been in the care of the state. It must be a national priority to create youth custody environments that are trauma-informed, trauma-integrated and offer care and crucially aftercare.

The themes derived from my Fellowship research offer an insight into how youth custody is being delivered internationally. Whilst many of the challenges are similar, the commitment to therapeutic care, and not correctional custody is evidenced by the significantly better outcomes reported and lower recidivism rates.

There is plentiful research that outlines what children who have experienced trauma need, to recover and thrive and there must be a commitment to developing environments, and journeys through adolescence that give opportunity for this. What shone throughout my time in Sweden, Belgium, Portugal, New York City and Missouri was the commitment of visionary service leaders and staff, who, through every single conversation I had, placed the child, and the victims of crime, at the centre of their thinking.

Due to the structure of their settings, as well as, in most cases, a legal framework that sees justice involved young people within their developmental context, there was an overwhelming belief in the potential of the young people in their care. Alongside this, a steadfast understanding of the importance of family, social capital and holding hope. The people and places visited facilitated healing, understanding this does not occur in isolation or just within the period of incarceration, and created space and services for this to start and continue post-secure accommodation.

To create this, we need to invest in differentiated youth custody accommodation, ensuring small-scale and close to home placements are available.

These placements must be able to offer staged care, promoting engagement in therapeutic process through working towards achievable goals and reducing restriction in line with reducing risk. Interventions must be offered to both young people and their families, valuing them; providing hope and helping them access the things they need.

Young people must be given the chance to learn, both about themselves and each other; and we must commit to seeing the value and influence of peers on each other in a positive way. It must be understood that working with justice involved youth is a valuable profession that has the opportunity to change lives, beyond just those of the young people incarcerated, and staff must be trained, supervised and supported, as well as well-compensated for this expert work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations from my Churchill Fellowship aim to apply what I have seen and experienced as good practice within youth justice accommodation to the UK context as I understand it. Through the recommendations there is an attempt to encourage change within youth justice accommodation, both at a site-by-site operational level and both operationally and strategically on a national level.



01 — The Youth Custody Service, supported by central government, should close all Young Offenders Institutions as soon as possible, replacing them with small-scale close to home facilities.

As outlined throughout this report, Young Offenders Institutions are failing young people. Throughout my fellowship travels it was clear that the first step to improving youth custody accommodation is by closing large-scale correctional facilities that institutionalise young people and reduce opportunities for them. This also means that children will be being looked after by staff who are local which will mean greater cultural similarities and experiences and hopefully better engagement and better quality care.

Small-scale facilities that are in communities are more effective, evidenced in the UK context by Secure Children's Homes that already operate. The development of the secure children's homes estate would also support the implementation of the remaining recommendations from this Fellowship. Additionally, this could also influence/impact how facilities were inspected and how success is measured, aligning this with care rather than custody.

Facilities within local communities also support re-integration and maintaining and building social capital, as well as working towards collective recognition and responsibility for caring for young people who have offended.

Smaller scale facilities may also give opportunity to create differentiated provision based on security level required. This creates more stable groups of young people which in turn, supports group cohesion and trust, creating a more therapeutic environment.

In the design of these facilities, it must be clear that they are for young people and they must be child-friendly and homely, recognising that when a child is in a cared-for environment, they will care for it and in turn, feel cared for themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS



02 — Alongside local authorities, the Youth Custody Service should make Step-down facilities available to all young people in custody to support phased reintegration back into communities.

Leaving custody has been described a ‘cliff edge’, both for children and adults. The treatment plan for children in custody must include a gradual reintegration into community living, experiencing liberty and support to problem solve when things do not go to plan. The creation of step-down facilities that provide accommodation and support to young people still under ‘order’, but working towards release creates a graded and phased transition. Step-down provision should be made available to all young people leaving custody as part of transition. Consideration of whether this could also involve ‘Release on Temporary License’ (ROTL) for a graded transition back home or to placement needs to take place. Children and families should continue to receive support from secure accommodation staff and community services during the transition phase, and plans must be made for ongoing support.



03 — Central government and the Youth Custody Service should create a ‘Family Strategy’, which includes a commitment to integrated family support, and the provision for family therapy for all young people coming into their custody.

The family strategy should build on the Case Management Guidance “How to support parents and carers of children in the youth justice system”, as well as creating minimum standards for all providers of youth custody accommodation. It should include an understanding that coming into custody is traumatic for the young person and their family and families need support to come to terms with what has happened and the impact this has had on them and often on their communities. Integrated family support, including the option of family therapy, should be offered as standard to all families coming through.

Additionally, there should be a commitment to ensuring that regular contact takes place, working with local authorities and partner agencies to understand barriers to contact, be that distance, finances, childcare etc. and make provision for this.

Phone-calls to family and friends should not be charged for in any provision and blocking contact should never be used as a punishment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The strategy should commit to close liaison between services local to the family and staff within the secure facility to understand the family's socio-economic situation and all other unmet needs within the family system and support should be offered to engage with services who can support meet these needs.

Youth custody providers should each have their own family engagement plan which includes the steps they take to communicate, include and involve families within the daily lives of their children, as well as the overall offer. This could include providing regular feedback at a predictable time, family time within the facilities and involvement of families in all stages of the sentence plan.



04 — The Youth Custody Service and the Youth Justice Service should develop a robust 'Aftercare' strategy and package, alongside partner agencies including DfE, NHS and local government to ensure that no young person leaving custody falls through the cracks.

As described in the introduction to this Fellowship, the recidivism rate for children who have been in custody is very high (over 60%). This means further victims of crime as well as ongoing disruption to the lives of children and families and further impact on the public purse.

There must be a commitment to clear, coherent and deliverable strategy of aftercare, that goes beyond the provision of license conditions. This must confirm commitment from health, education, housing and children's and adults' services to work together to ensure joined up multi-agency support for some of the most vulnerable and often disenfranchised young people and families in society.

Aftercare must also involve the opportunity for ongoing contact with the staff from within the facility where the child was placed for custody or from trust staff who worked with them during their incarceration to ensure continuity of care, understanding of history and development and support the child with continuing to implement the lessons learned during their time in custody.

RECOMMENDATIONS



05 — The Youth Custody Service should review the language used to describe time in secure accommodation.

As highlighted throughout the report, the language used to describe children in custody changes the way in which they relate to the provision of care and support and engage in what should hopefully be a therapeutic and rehabilitative process. Sometimes being in a secure environment is the first time a child has felt safe or had regular meals and caring adults around them. It is important to recognise the impact of this being provided only in ‘custody’ during a ‘sentence’ for a child. Changing language used to reflect the therapeutic and rehabilitative aims of the time in secure accommodation should work to improve how the child understands how their needs can be met, as well as how others, both internally and externally, relate to that child. It will also impact how the child relates to their environment.



06 — All staff working with youth involved young people should be provided with adequate training related to the needs of justice involved youth and appropriate supervision, recognising the emotional impact of creating and maintaining therapeutic environments.

The need for well trained and emotionally intelligent and attuned adults working within youth secure environments is clear. The intensity of the support required for young people in these environments, as well as the understanding, patience and commitment to some of the challenges that young people may present with requires exceptional people. Staff also need to be relatable and representative of the communities in which young people come from.

Youth secure providers should have a shared therapeutic model that all staff are trained in, including ensuring there is an understanding of adolescent development and the impact of trauma on development. Additionally, staff should be supported to role model the expected behaviours from young people and work with young people and groups in embedding new skills.

Multi-disciplinary staff groups with clearly defined roles and responsibilities in the design and implementation of care and intervention plans support cohesive messaging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Supervision should be provided to all staff across the facilities, and training programmes should include supervision of the trained skills in order to support embedding these.



07 — Legal recommendations: review the age of criminal responsibility in the UK, aligning this with the UNCRC recommendations. Consideration should also be given to abolishing transfer of young people from the children's estate to the adult estate.

Whilst beyond the scope of this Fellowship research, a final recommendation focuses on the legal aspect of detention for children and young people, given the draconian and almost undifferentiated legal system for justice involved youth.

The UK government should commit to reviewing the minimum age for criminal responsibility, bringing it in line with the UNCRC recommendations, and aligning it with comparable European countries.

Additionally, the UK still sentences young people to a significant time in custody for the most serious crimes, meaning there is a cohort of young people who move from the children's secure estate into adult prison to complete their sentences. The purpose and need for this should be reviewed for children who committed crimes under a certain age, with more focus given to understanding their progress in custody. Currently, long sentences involving an inevitable move to the adult estate may reduce motivation to change or engage with the therapeutic and rehabilitative process within the youth secure estate as the child focusses instead on learning to protect themselves within adult prison.

DISSEMINATION

This Fellowship has been a brilliant opportunity, both personally and professionally. It has given me the opportunity to develop my knowledge and understanding of international models of delivering youth custody, opening my eyes to the possibilities and what it takes to make these successful. It certainly reignited my passion for this work.

Following publication of this report, I will share my findings with the Youth Custody Service, as well as providers of Youth Custody placements across England and Wales and support, where I can share the realisation of my recommendations. I will also share my report with the Department for Education, NHSE and regulatory bodies including Ofsted, CQC and HMIP.

I continue to use the personal development that this opportunity afforded me in my everyday work within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Bradford. I remember that what we have is not what we must always have and attempt to always apply creativity to my work, whilst remembering to continually put the children and families we support at the forefront of decision making.



**I remember that
what we have is not
what we must always
have**

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACS – Administration of Children’s Services, New York

CQC – Care Quality Commission

DfE – Department for Education

DGRSP - The Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services

DYS – Division of Youth Services, Missouri

EC – Educational Centre

HMIP – His Majesties Inspectorate of Prisons

HMPPS – His Majesties Prison and Probation Service

IPPJ - Institutions Publiques de Protection de la

Jeunesse **MYSI** – Missouri Youth Services Institute

NHSE – National Health Service

England **ROTL** – Release of Temporary

License **SCH** – Secure Children’s Home

SiS - Statens Institutions

Styrelse **STC** – Secure

Training Centre **UK** – United

Kingdom

UNCRC – United National Convention on the Rights of the Child

YCS – Youth Custody Service

YJB – Youth Justice Board

YOI – Young Offenders Institution

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