Building trust: the importance of positive relationships in young offender institutions

A thematic review by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

June 2025

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Introduction

This report sets out in stark terms the failure by the Youth Custody Service to create environments in which staff and children in young offender institutions (YOIs) are able to form positive, appropriate relationships. It also reveals the lack of effectiveness of the framework for integrated care and custody support plan initiatives, which were designed to provide bespoke support to children to help them to progress through their sentences.

Relationships between authoritative, well-trained and well-supported frontline staff and children in settings in which there are clear rules, sanctions and incentives, are fundamental to delivering the safe establishments in which children can continue their education and start to address their offending behaviour. However, in our annual survey of children held in YOIs, their perceptions of these relationships have been consistently negative for several years. In 2024–25 fewer than half of the children in YOIs felt cared for by staff and one in three reported there was no member of staff they could turn to if they had a problem. This is concerning because staff rely on meaningful, trusting relationships to encourage children to engage with education, health care or offending behaviour programmes, as well as to defuse conflict and violence.

During this thematic review we interviewed children and staff and found that they wanted the same things: to have consistent, regular staff working on individual living units and enough time to get to know each other properly. Depressingly, with the exception of Parc where things were better, we found little that was reliable or consistent about life in YOIs. In addition, because children were locked in their cells for most of the day there was very little time for staff to get to know those in their care.

The schemes intended to build positive relationships were not implemented well. The framework for integrated care – known as ‘secure stairs’ – which was introduced in 2016 to improve the care of children in custody appears to have had little impact. Many frontline members of staff we spoke to had little knowledge about what happened in the various planning meetings within this framework, despite working directly with the children every day.

More fundamentally many children told us staff did not routinely introduce themselves to children they did not know and that unreliable responses to everyday requests meant they did not trust staff to deal with bigger issues, including bullying and violence. Most children in YOIs told us they were unable to have a meaningful weekly conversation with a member of staff they knew. This was despite large staff complements that included many leaders who could have easily run sessions themselves.

We were also concerned to find many frontline operational staff felt unsupported and, despite working in very challenging environments, did not receive the support that those in other professions take for granted, including regular supervision from their manager.

In 2018 my predecessor reported that children who had good relationships with staff were likely to be motivated to engage with behaviour management schemes. Seven years on behaviour management is an increasing challenge but chronic inconsistency and a failure to embed the framework for integrated care are corroding the relationships needed for this progress.

Charlie Taylor
Chief Inspector of Prisons
May 2025

Concerns

1. **The limited time children spent out of their cells meant there were few opportunities for them to build trusting relationships with staff.**

2. **Systems designed to support staff to develop good relationships were poorly implemented and the framework for integrated care did not include frontline staff who worked directly with children.**

3. **Many frontline residential staff did not receive regular support and supervision from line managers to enable them to develop their skills.**

Background

The importance of relationships

The relationships we have with family and friends and the support provided by those close to us are fundamental to our success and happiness. This is particularly so for children, who rely on their parents or other carers for their everyday needs. Children who live in young offender institutions (YOIs) have often experienced a difficult start in life, including neglect, abuse and a constantly changing array of adults looking after them. Some turn to gangs in an attempt to find support and a sense of belonging elsewhere.

There is mounting evidence that relationships between staff and children in custody are a key element in delivering better outcomes. HM Inspectorate of Probation's evidence base on relationship-centred services concludes:

> 'The clear message for probation and youth justice is that relationships should be central and take precedence over processes.'

This is important because trusting relationships can be called on to diffuse potentially violent situations or encourage children to attend education and training. Nearly all of the children in YOIs will be released, and if they have learnt how to interact in a healthy way with others, they are less likely to create chaos in our communities. The support provided by staff in custody can help them lead successful, law-abiding lives when they are released.

In YOIs frontline residential staff – youth justice workers, or prison custody officers in the private sector – are particularly important. They have responsibility for almost every aspect of a child's daily life, from making sure they have enough clothing, toiletries or toilet roll to keeping them safe from violence and encouraging them to access education or offending behaviour courses.

However, children consistently describe relationships with staff that do not meet the aims of leaders within the Youth Custody Service, an integrated approach to caring for children or our expectations.

HM Inspectorate of Prisons' Expectations for children in prison: Relationships between staff and children

- Children are treated with care by all staff, and are expected, encouraged and enabled to take responsibility for their own actions and decisions. Staff set clear and fair boundaries. Staff have high expectations of all children and help them to achieve their potential.
- Children are treated with care and respect for their human dignity at all times. Relationships between children and staff are warm, compassionate and helpful but staff maintain appropriate boundaries.

- Children are encouraged and supported to take responsibility for their rehabilitation and to contribute positively to the prison community.

- Children have an identified member of staff they can turn to on a day-to-day basis who is aware of and responds to their individual needs. Staff provide support and help children to make positive changes in their lives.

While staff are keen to develop effective, trusting relationships with children, our inspections find that too often daily transactional requests take precedence. The challenges YOIs face in reducing staff turnover and managing the numbers who are not available for work because of sickness or restricted duties, can limit the time children spend out of their cells to interact with staff. Our 2024 thematic review 'Improving behaviour in prisons' describes a clear link between relationships with staff and good behaviour management. In our inspections of YOIs in 2023–24, every establishment in England was criticised for ineffective behaviour management.

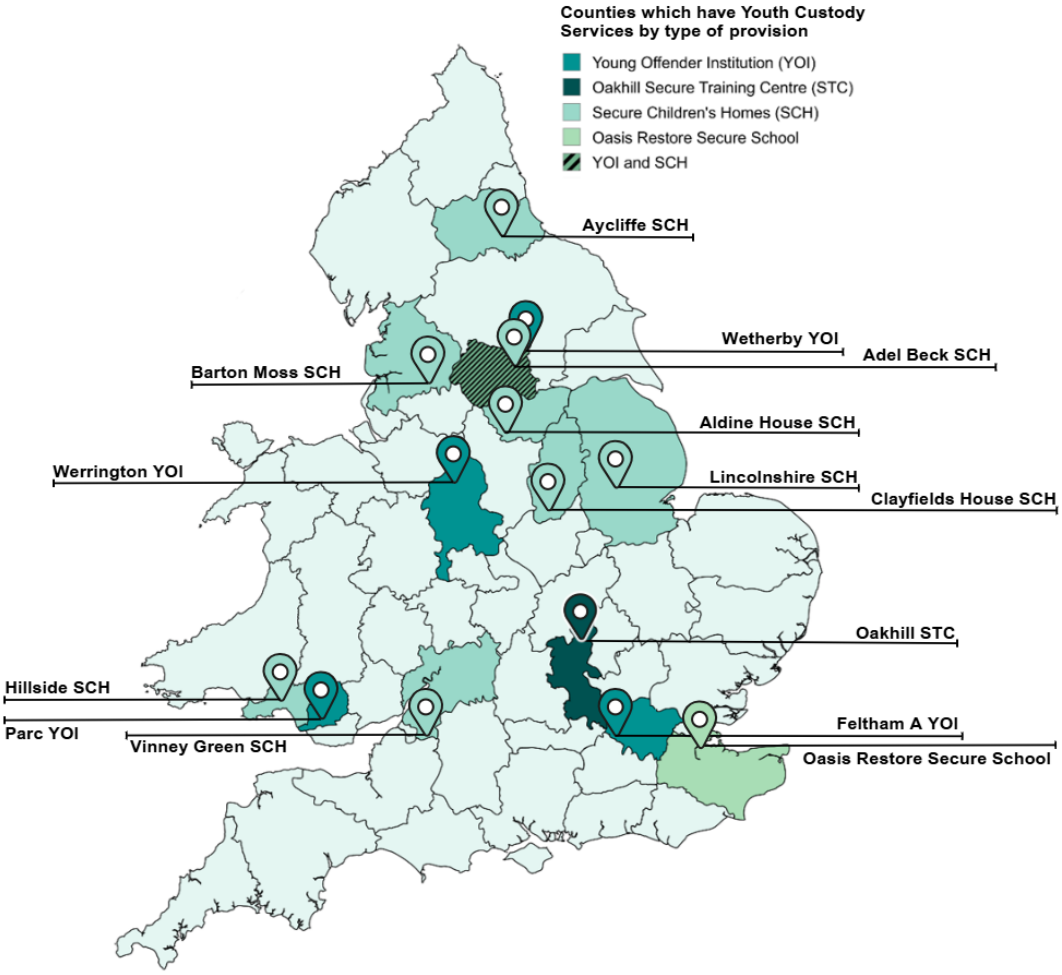
The Youth Custody Service

The Youth Custody Service (YCS) was formed in September 2017. It is part of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), and is responsible for running public sector establishments and commissioning and managing the contracts of private sector sites for children between 10 and 18 years of age.

The number of children in custody has decreased since the creation of the YCS. In September 2017 there were 975 children and young adults in the YCS estate, but by March 2025 this had reduced to 502 (source: Youth custody data - GOV.UK). The number of sites at which children can be detained has also decreased, most recently because Cookham Wood has been re-rolled as an adult prison. The YCS now has four YOIs holding children aged 15–18, one secure training centre, one secure school and eight secure children's homes in which to place children who have been remanded or sentenced to custody.

The introduction of the YCS, with its own management and policy teams, offered the opportunity to move away from adult-centric policies and processes and instead focus on what best met the needs of children in custody and the challenges they faced and posed. Changes since then have included the introduction of youth justice workers to replace prison officers in YOIs that hold children, bespoke training for those recruited as youth justice workers and a level four qualification course for youth justice workers. Alongside these, the Framework for Integrated Care and Custody Support Plan arrangements were introduced to enhance the individual care given to children.

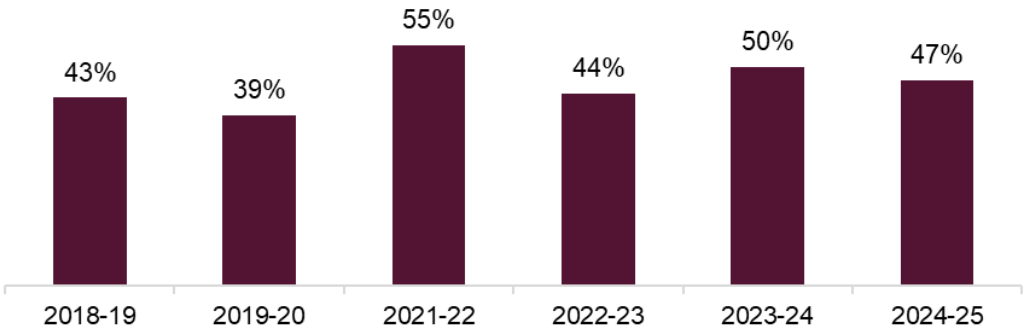
Figure 1: The location of Youth Custody Service provision in England and Wales.



Focus and methodology of this review

At every inspection of a YOI we ask the children to complete a questionnaire. In 2024–25 only 47% of children in YOIs said they felt cared for by staff and 34% reported there was no staff member they could turn to for help if they had a problem. This is not an anomaly: since we began asking these questions a large proportion of children have reported that they do not feel cared for by staff. Our interviews support these findings, with many children across all establishments telling us they do not feel most staff care for them.

Figure 2: Children's reporting of feeling cared for by most staff has remained consistently low.
YOIs in England and Wales. Data not included for 2020-21 as it was an incomplete inspection year due to the pandemic.



Source: HMI Prisons' detainee surveys

This thematic review aimed to understand the reasons for children's poor perceptions of their relationships with staff, and identify positive practice and areas for improvement.

We collected data for three YOI establishments holding children in England and Wales in September 2024 – Parc, Werrington and Wetherby and Keppel. The data collection had two stages: the first was a case file analysis to collect key information on the delivery of the custody support plan (CuSP) and behaviour management processes for a representative sample of children. The second was on-site fieldwork, which included individual interviews with children, officers and members of staff, and group discussions with officers and custodial managers. In addition, we held meetings with managers, reviewed key data and policies, and observed activities on the units. Further detail about the methodology is included in Appendix I.

Section 1 Day-to-day interactions

Relationships with youth justice workers

1.1 Most children we interviewed gave similar descriptions of what made a good youth justice worker and were able to give examples of good officers across all sites. The key aspects were strong interpersonal skills and efficiency in completing tasks, which built a sense of trust. Children were unlikely to trust youth justice workers with significant issues like keeping them safe if they had been unable to resolve everyday requests for them in the past.

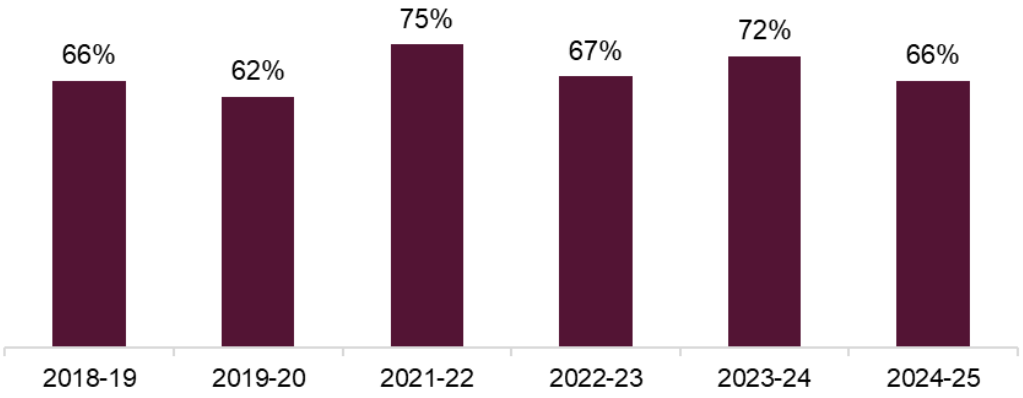
1.2 Staff we spoke to valued similar qualities, but also raised confidence and resilience as being crucial to the role. They felt better able to build relationships with children when they were well supported by their line managers.

Strong interpersonal skills

1.3 Children responded well to officers who were polite, friendly, and approachable; who made conversation with them and treated them as more than 'just another prisoner'. One child said, 'you can just chat to them like normal people'. Staff at Parc routinely introduced themselves to new children on the unit to make sure that they felt comfortable asking for help. We were concerned to find this was not everyday practice in other establishments, making it difficult for new arrivals, children who were moved to different wings, and those being looked after by staff who were cross-deployed to know who was looking after them.

1.4 Children said the best officers listened to and addressed their needs or concerns. In our 2024–25 surveys, 66% of children said that there was a staff member they could turn to for help if they had a problem, a figure that has been broadly consistent since 2018–19.

Figure 3: Only two-thirds of children reported that there was a member of staff they could turn to for help if they had a problem.
YOIs in England and Wales. Data not included for 2020-21 as it was an incomplete inspection year due to the pandemic.



Source: HMI Prisons' detainee surveys

1.5 Children said they turned to staff they could relate to, were empathetic and non-judgemental. They also said it was crucial that they could speak to officers in confidence, without worrying that they would 'gossip' about matters with their colleagues, or other children.

1.6 Staff who were perceived to have a good sense of humour were popular among children, and staff acknowledged that this helped to break down barriers on the wing. Children said they preferred officers who appeared to be 'a good human, not just prison officer', but it was important that these qualities were seen as being authentic. Issues arose when children sensed staff were emulating the style of other officers 'without putting in the groundwork first'. Children described some 'cheeky' officers, who made 'snidey' comments before getting to know them properly which created unnecessary conflict on the wing.

1.7 Children valued staff who set consistent boundaries and provided explanations. They appreciated it when staff were honest about the reasons for decisions and took responsibility for them. Staff said setting professional boundaries required officers to have confidence in their decisions and an ability to stay calm when dealing with challenging behaviour from children.

Efficiency and reliability

1.8 Children consistently reported that they trusted staff who gave updates on the progress of a request as well as resolving the issue raised. They were more likely to seek help from officers they felt were responsive and reliable. This meant some staff became overwhelmed with requests.

1.9 Long periods locked behind cell doors created problems with getting things done. In our 2024–25 surveys, only 35% of children said that

their cell bell was responded to within five minutes. At Wetherby, children told inspectors it could take up to 45 minutes to get a response and at Werrington, one child said they had pressed their cell bell five times just to get a plastic cup. The failure to respond to such basic requests undermined children's trust that the establishment would help to resolve more significant issues. Staff described feeling under pressure to run a complicated daily routine as a barrier to being able to deal with children's requests.

1.10 Children said they were frustrated when staff said 'no' without a reason or took a long time to action requests, with one saying 'they don't realise how much it affects us'. They told us that they avoided asking certain officers for help because they knew they would be let down. Some said they had come to expect responses such as 'we're busy, we're busy', 'ask this person' or 'it's not my job'. Staff reported that the sheer number of requests made it easy to forget things, and that to preserve relationships they were sometimes forced to refuse to help altogether. One member of staff said:

> "Officers are pulled from pillar to post so they can't commit to helping a child because if they don't have time to do it, it has a negative effect on relationships."

Time to build relationships

1.11 Providing the opportunities for staff to interact with children was crucial in building relationships. Some officers described applying for their role because they wanted to make a positive impact on children's lives, but that they had found that there was simply no time for this. Newly recruited youth justice workers told us that the job description and training did not accurately reflect the reality of the role. Many of the interactions we observed between children and staff were pleasant but cursory and transactional in nature.

1.12 At Werrington and Wetherby we found that there was almost no regular opportunity for frontline residential staff to get to know the children in their care. At Werrington the only chance was during exercise periods as association only happened at weekends. At Wetherby the situation was worse, with most wings not offering exercise, association or time for domestic tasks during the week. When exercise was provided at the weekend staff did not go onto the yards with children but observed them from the other side of a fence.

Exercise yard with a chair for staff

1.13 The lack of informal interaction opportunities was frustrating for staff who said that they could only talk to children while they were escorting them on movements and had little time to help them. This meant children were less likely to approach staff with a problem. One youth justice worker said:

> 'We don't have the power to change a lot and the kids know it.'

1.14 In our interviews, several children told us that they preferred going directly to a custodial manager or resettlement worker (see Glossary) for help, believing it inefficient to ask other officers who might pass the task on to the manager anyway. This again limited the opportunities for children to develop relationships with frontline staff and often led to unnecessary waits of several days or even weeks to get issues resolved.

1.15 In contrast, at Parc, where children spent much more time out of their cells on association and had time to carry out domestic tasks such as laundry and filing applications, staff had better opportunities to get to know children. Officers said they tried to set up games or activities when children arrived on the wing and that the best thing an officer could do was 'be amongst them'. Officers told us that chatting over a meal or game of pool helped children to relax and speak openly, with one officer saying there is 'no us and them'.

The impact of eating together

Mealtimes in YOIs, like those in family homes, are an opportunity for regular positive interactions between staff and children in their care. In contrast to formal assessments, custody support plan sessions or sentence planning meetings, mealtimes give staff and children an opportunity to have a more normal conversation about television, football or what the child has done that day in education.

Unfortunately, most children in YOIs had to eat all of their meals alone in their cells. However, there were exceptions: at Wetherby, children who lived on the enhanced unit (for boys who had behaved well and were at the top of the incentives scheme) were allowed to eat out of their cells each evening, and at Parc all children ate their meals out of their cells with staff. We observed these mealtimes at both establishments and they provided crucial opportunities for staff to build the meaningful relationships that were relied on during more difficult times.

Building design

1.16 Living units in all three YOIs were not specifically designed for children. This created challenges, most notably at Werrington and Wetherby, where most children lived on units that were far too large to facilitate meaningful relationships between children and staff. The four main wings at Wetherby could each hold up to 60 boys and the two at Werrington could hold 52 and 44. Parc's two wings were smaller, with a capacity of 22 and 24, which helped staff and children to form individual relationships.

A wing, Werrington (left) and G wing, Parc

Exmouth unit, Wetherby

1.17 Because the buildings had been designed for adults, there was a lack of meeting room space for private discussions. This made it very difficult for staff to speak to children away from their peers and undermined the implementation of several schemes, including the custody support plan.

Cross-deployment of staff

1.18 The frequent cross-deployment of staff from one part of an establishment to another exacerbated the problems of large living units. For instance, at Werrington, three out of four staff working on one wing had been cross-deployed from other units and were unfamiliar with the needs of the children in their care.

1.19 This was a problem even in specialist units. During our visit to Wetherby we observed an afternoon session on the enhanced support unit, holding five children who needed bespoke daily routines, where all of the frontline staff had been cross-deployed from other units. This undermined the purpose of the unit to provide consistent, specialist support for children with multiple needs.

Section 2 One-to-one sessions

Custody support plans

The custody support plan (CuSP) was designed to help encourage the building of positive relationships between staff and children and to support motivational goal setting. Each child in a YOI should have a youth justice worker allocated to them as their dedicated CuSP officer to support them during their time in custody.

CuSP is based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and features a wooden brick tower which represents different levels of the model. In CuSP the five levels are: physiological, safety and security, love and belonging, esteem and achievement and self-actualisation needs. During one-to-one sessions the idea is that children are asked to build and use the tower to help them talk about each of the levels and their progress. The CuSP officer should review progress regularly with the child to encourage and support them to set and achieve goals for the week ahead.

Frontline staff are given CuSP and motivational interviewing training before taking on a CuSP role. A clear structure for CuSP sessions has been designed which is tailored to meet the different learning styles of children, and should be followed in each CuSP discussion.

CuSP is supposed to be delivered to each child by the same member of staff. This allows the staff member to build an in-depth understanding of the child and the child to feel more able to discuss sensitive topics, building a level of trust which improves the likelihood that the child will disclose information when something happens.

2.1 CuSP delivery has been irregular and inconsistent since its introduction and our inspection reports have made frequent reference to this. Recently, YOIs have been asked to deliver CuSP in accordance with a 'ladder', the idea being that as YOIs embed delivery of CuSP at a specific rung (level) they can then move up to the next rung. The ladder has seven rungs. During this thematic review, Parc was fully delivering CuSP while Werrington was on rung four and Wetherby rung two.

2.2 This meant that children at each YOI had very different experiences of CuSP. In practice, Parc aimed to give all children a full session each week, Wetherby aimed to give every child a weekly check in or brief meeting, and at Werrington only children with an enhanced support team (see 'The Framework for Integrated Care, section 3), segregated under rule 49 or located on the Wade unit could have had a full, weekly session.

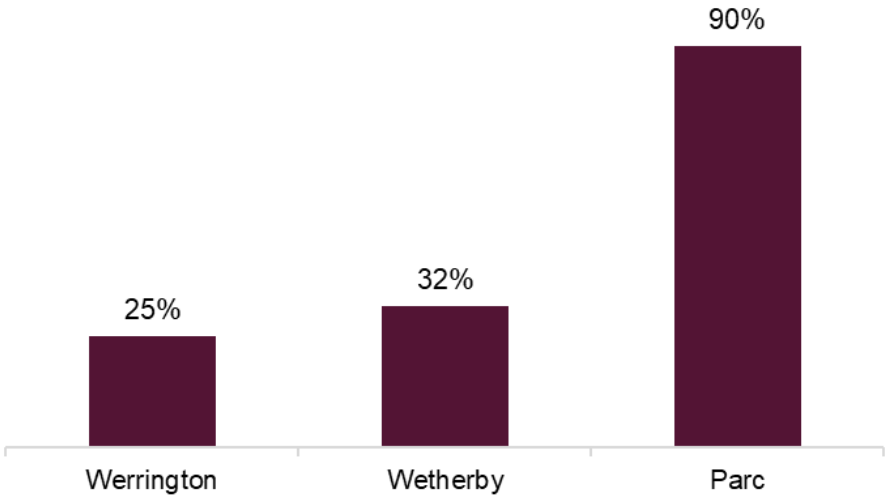
2.3 In practice we found that CuSP delivery was inconsistent and varied considerably in both quality and quantity between the YOIs. The primary reason provided by leaders was a shortage of available staff and meeting rooms to accommodate the CuSP sessions. However, at

all sites officers were only allocates one or two children each and there were large senior teams who could have taken cases themselves.

2.4 We reviewed the records of 113 children at the three sites over a 12-week period. We found that 80% of the sample had received some degree of CuSP contact (90% of 10 sampled children at Parc, 78% of 63 at Wetherby and 80% of 40 at Werrington). However, much of this contact was cursory in nature, in the worst cases, a recorded session was an officer asking if a child was okay through a locked door. In many others these sessions lasted only two or three minutes and often took place in communal areas or exercise yards with other children present, which meant that the child was much less likely to talk about sensitive issues.

2.5 Only 35% of the 113 children had what could be described as a full CuSP session that lasted for around 30 to 45 minutes, was held in private, and where children talked about their needs and plans were set to support them. The sample showed disparity in the numbers of full CuSP sessions held between each site. At Parc, 90% of sampled children had a full CuSP session, but at Wetherby this was only 32% of sampled children, and at Werrington just 25%.

Figure 4: Children at Parc were more likely to have received at least one full CuSP session than at Werrington and Wetherby.



Source: HMI Prisons' review of case files

2.6 Only 3% of the sample received a full CuSP session every week, and all those children were held at Parc. No child we reviewed at either Wetherby or Werrington received any full CuSP sessions on a weekly basis.

2.7 In our review we found that there were also issues with the consistency of delivery. Contrary to expectations, CuSP was only delivered by the same member of staff in 51% of cases. Again, there was variation between the three sites; at Parc records showed that 89% of the

children sampled saw the same member of staff, while at Werrington it was 50% and at Wetherby 45%.

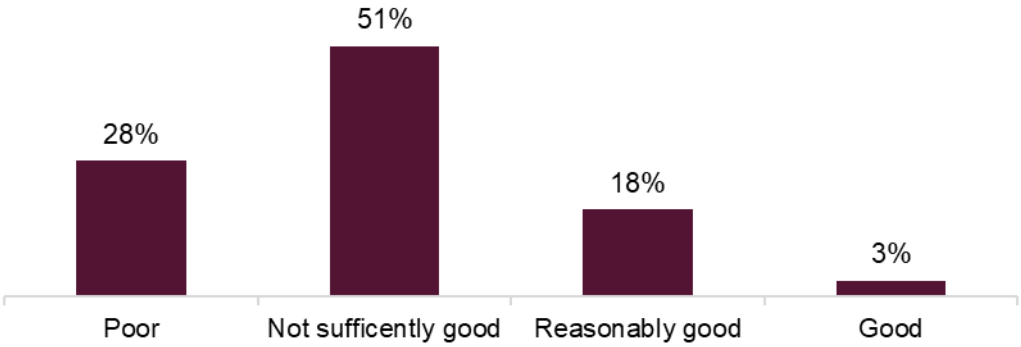
2.8 We found that children were much more likely to engage with the sessions if they knew the officer. At Parc, there was evidence that the officer delivering the CuSP session knew the child well in 89% of the sample cases; at Werrington this figure was 63% and at Wetherby it was even lower, at only 37%. As one member of staff at Wetherby told us:

> "It's whoever's available on that day, it's just a bunch of shit. I don't really engage with it."

2.9 The best CuSP sessions we reviewed covered the child's overall well-being, how safe they felt, how they got on with staff and their peers and other areas pertinent to the child's circumstances, such as family ties, their current court case, the next steps following sentencing or release arrangements. These sessions also allowed the child to give some input and direction in the conversation, allowing them to ask for things they needed, receive information or to complain.

2.10 Children told us they felt more cared for and respected when staff listened to their needs in these sessions and resolved their issues, and this in turn helped to promote better relationships between staff and children. We assessed that the overwhelming majority of CuSP contact was not sufficiently good or was poor. Notably none of the CuSP sessions from Parc were assessed as poor.

Figure 5: The majority of CuSP sessions were assessed as not sufficiently good or poor.
Werrington, Wetherby and Parc YOIs



Source: HMI Prisons' review of case files

2.11 We interviewed eight children at each site and their perceptions reflected the statistical findings. They appreciated the time and contact

full CuSP sessions provided, and valued the increased trust it generated when they had a consistent officer. Most children who had some form of CuSP contact said they liked the fact that someone found time for them; most also said that if they asked for something during these sessions, they were confident it would happen. Children at Parc were the most positive and some said they would seek out their CuSP officer to speak to them and discuss their issues outside of their regular sessions.

> "I can trust her; I can tell her stuff."
>
> (Child at Parc who had the same CuSP officer for eight months)

2.12 CuSP is not a complicated concept. It should simply help to build relationships with weekly, meaningful interactions between a child and a consistent member of staff. In reality, sessions did not take place weekly, they were not meaningful and they were conducted by whoever was on duty that day. As a result staff and children had little confidence in the process and it was ineffective in supporting children.

Section 3 Interventions and planning

The Framework for Integrated Care

Often referred to as 'Secure Stairs', this framework was developed as a national project by NHS England and is delivered in partnership with the Department for Education and the YCS. Established in 2016, it is designed to improve the quality of care and outcomes for children and young people in the secure estate. The framework underpins the behaviour management and support framework designed by the YCS.

It acts as a joined-up systems approach to intervention, planning and care which is evidence based and delivered by well-trained and supported staff. One of the core principles of the framework is that frontline residential staff, such as youth justice workers, are at the centre of its delivery. NHS England continues to provide annual funding to support the framework, which has never been used in Wales.

Key components of the framework include multi-agency formulations, support team meetings and guided reflective practice for staff. Formulations are the cornerstone to building an understanding of each child and their background story and when completed are known as 'My Story' documents. These should be available to all staff who have contact with that child so they have a better understanding of the child's history and circumstances and can use this to inform how they work with them. Each child's progress should be reviewed and supported by a regular multi-agency support team meeting which can include the child. A fundamental element of the framework is that staff have the necessary skill sets and ongoing support, and as such guided, reflective practice is an integral part of the model.

Children with more complex needs can have additional input from an enhanced support team. This is a multi-agency team which is put together specifically for a child, and which meets regularly to plan and review the child's care and management.

3.1 We asked staff of various grades at the two English YOIs what they thought of the framework. The majority told us it was a good idea in principle, but that it was poorly implemented and they did not have the time or staff resource to operate within the framework as intended.

3.2 Most staff had been given training on the framework at some point. Even staff at Parc, which as a Welsh YOI was not funded to use it, had some understanding of the framework, as it was included in the curriculum for the youth justice worker foundation degree they had completed.

3.3 Where formulations (see 'The Framework for Integrated Care', section 3) had been completed staff told us they did not always have access to them, did not know where they were kept, or did not have time to read them.

3.4 At Wetherby staff who worked on the enhanced support unit, holding five children, had a much better understanding of the framework and involvement in the process. There were regular meetings to discuss children who were on the caseload and staff felt these smaller units were more suited to the process than larger units. One member of staff said:

> "How can you read and learn 50 formulations?"

3.5 At both YOIs in England formulations were connected to a detailed 'My Story' which explored the child's life experience and provided some history to their offending behaviour and triggers for violence or self-harm. These were generally of good quality and contained useful information that would help staff in the day-to-day management of the child. The fundamental weakness was the lack of involvement of frontline residential staff in the process; CuSP officers, who were meant to know the children best, rarely attended meetings and were often unaware of the contents of individual children's formulations or plans. Staff we spoke to reported this was often because they were detailed to other tasks at the time of the meeting. This meant the resulting plans did not benefit from the knowledge of frontline staff who often felt disengaged from the process.

3.6 Staff at Wetherby felt that attendance at enhanced support team meetings for children could be inconsistent and not everyone who should attend did. Frontline staff at Werrington also felt the framework did not work well.

3.7 There was a clear risk that the significant NHS investment in the framework for integrated care was being wasted because too little thought had been given to how frontline residential staff could be involved in the process.

Section 4 Support for frontline residential staff

4.1 In our interviews and focus groups with staff, they told us that appropriate training and support must be in place to enable them to support children with a range of complex needs effectively. We found that when staff were supported, there was greater job satisfaction and better realisation of staff potential. This in turn improved the relationships that staff had with the children on the wing.

4.2 At all three sites we visited there were enough staff members in post, including managers, to deliver basics such as a weekly conversation, or CuSP session, with a child and supervision with frontline staff. Despite this many operational staff at Wetherby and Werrington said they did not remember the last time they had a line manager check-in. At these sites high numbers of staff who could not be deployed, because they were sick or injured, led to inconsistencies in which staff were available to support the children. Some children told us that not having a regular staffing group meant they were less likely to ask for help if they needed to.

4.3 Officers at Parc praised their management team and said that their support enabled them to fulfil their role to the best of their ability. Staff said the open-door policy and six-monthly review meetings meant they felt their development was prioritised. Managers were visible and accessible on the wing, and it was not uncommon to see the head of the children's unit serving meals for children at lunchtime. The modelling of positive behaviour and engagement with children from leaders at Parc set a positive standard for others to follow. Some children at Werrington also said they regularly saw the governor and felt she knew them individually. However, a child at Wetherby said of leaders and managers:

> "They don't know us and don't know like what goes on the unit... the only time they are there is to tell us off."

4.4 Staff at Parc also said that regular formal supervision and support, particularly from first line managers, had created a positive workplace culture and that high staff morale had led to lower rates of staff turnover and sick leave. This improved their relationships with children as staff were less likely to be cross deployed to cover gaps on other units working with children they did not know as well.

4.5 Staff at all sites were offered similar basic training and an opportunity to complete a foundation degree or level 4 apprenticeship in youth justice which was a significant investment in staff working in the sector. How staff viewed this training differed greatly between the sites. Frontline staff at Parc spoke highly of the youth justice degree and felt it boosted their skills. Elsewhere, however, staff were more likely to report that this training exacerbated existing problems, in particular staffing

shortfalls, cross deployment and inconsistency when staff were given time to study.

4.6 While there were differing views about the usefulness of the degree and apprenticeship, there was a clear need for staff working with children with multiple needs to be properly trained. Frontline residential staff in YOIs have a challenging role and many do it without any formal support or feedback from leaders and managers. The differing feedback from staff at Parc shows the importance that day-to-day management and support have in improving morale and in creating enthusiasm for further development.

Section 5 Behaviour management

5.1 Although a range of incentives and rewards exist in children's YOIs, our 2024–25 surveys found that only 32% of children felt that these encouraged them to behave, and a lower proportion – 26% – thought they were applied fairly.

5.2 Incentives schemes involved staff giving out small instant rewards (merits), positive encouragement or warnings and each week promoting or demoting children to one of three incentive levels. While the schemes varied between the sites, promotion could mean more time out of cell or access to a wider variety of activities and equipment in their cell or access to more of their own money each week.

5.3 However, children told us there was a far greater focus from frontline residential staff on poor behaviour:

> "They focus so much on my negative behaviour, they don't seem to realise when I'm actually behaving."
>
> (Child at Wetherby)

5.4 Officers we spoke to also said that there was too much focus on the negatives. At Werrington, three negatives resulted in an instant downgrade, regardless of the number of positives. This meant some children felt positive recognition counted for very little. A child with complex needs told us that new staff arrived with negative preconceptions about him because of the focus on their bad behaviour, and other aspects of their personality were rarely discussed.

5.5 Our review of the records of 113 children supported this view: we found nearly all (106) had received a positive or negative entry over the previous three months. However, the scheme appeared to be applied very differently across departments. Our analysis showed that education was the most frequent source of positive entries on the system. In contrast, frontline residential staff handed out nearly twice as many warnings (93) as merits (49). Children sometimes reported feeling overlooked by staff and not receiving verbal praise when they were behaving well.

5.6 There were clear weaknesses in communicating with children about their behaviour. Of the cases we reviewed we assessed the quality of entries about behaviour to be not sufficiently good for 67% of children and reasonably good for 30%. The remainder were poor; there were no entries at any YOI that we regarded as good. There was little evidence to show that children were involved or spoken to and no examples where children were invited to weekly review boards. Only staff at Parc were aware of managers having operational oversight of the behaviour management system.

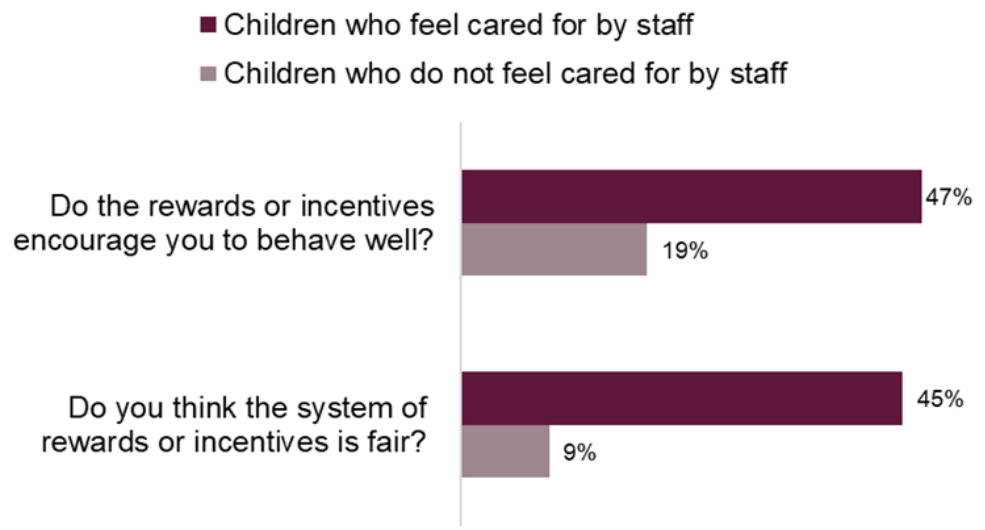
5.7 In our survey, 64% of children said staff explained to them what they did wrong after getting into trouble and in our interviews staff agreed that not all officers found the time to properly debrief a child. Many children told us that they had sometimes received a incentive scheme warning or notice of an adjudication under the door without an explanation from staff, which some said left them feeling forgotten about.

5.8 Children reported particular frustration about staff giving behaviour warnings for the misuse of emergency cell bells. Most children spent most of their time locked alone in their cells without other ways of attracting officer attention, and they felt it was unfair to be punished for using the cell bells in situations which were not deemed to be emergencies by staff.

5.9 There were sometimes perceptions of officers having 'favourites', or of the children who behaved well receiving the most the attention. Staff attributed differential treatment to operational struggles such as group sizes, understaffing, or officer fatigue. Officers contradicting one another and inconsistencies in management decisions also led to feelings of injustice and unequal treatment.

5.10 Children at Parc reported more positively about the incentives system than at the other sites. This was because the incentives, particularly more time out of cell and taking part in activities, were delivered more consistently than at the other sites. Yet the relationships staff built through the CuSP were of most importance. Our survey of children held in YOIs consistently finds a link between children who feel cared for by staff and those that are motivated to behave through the incentives scheme.

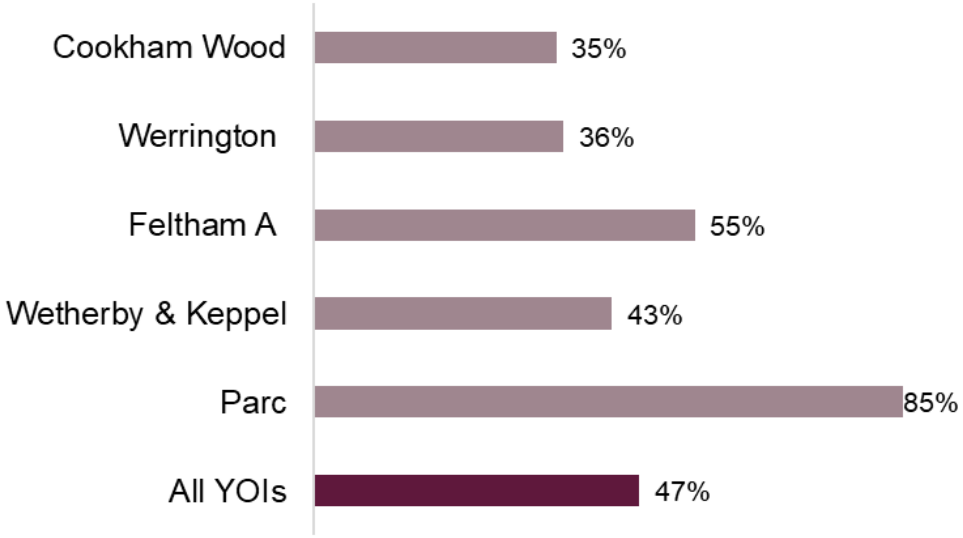
Figure 6: Children who report that they feel cared for by staff are more likely to report favourably about rewards and incentives.
YOIs in England and Wales, 2024–25



Source: HMI Prisons' detainee surveys

5.11 At Parc more children felt cared for and promoting positive behaviour was more successful.

Figure 7: Parc had the highest percentage of children who felt cared for by staff.
YOIs in England and Wales, 2024–25



Source: HMI Prisons' detainee surveys

Section 6 The impact on care

6.1 At a basic level, children and staff felt that providing food, safety and regime was a form of caring for children in custody. In a particularly concerning example, one child at Wetherby said officers not throwing food through the door onto the floor made him feel cared for.

6.2 Both children and staff referred to officers as having a 'duty of care', although in these instances children sometimes felt that staff cared only about the basic requirements of the job role, rather than caring for them as individuals. Children said things like, 'really they don't care about us they care about their job' and 'some might say officers getting toilet roll when asked was showing care, but others would say that is what they are expected to do'.

6.3 Most, however, perceived care as playing a more meaningful role in child's life. Children spoke about officers who found time for them, asked them how they were and noticed if they had a bad day. It was notable that when children spoke about care they most often referred to staff who did not work on their residential unit, such as resettlement staff, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Barnardo's, psychologists or enrichment staff. Children at Parc did refer to their CuSP officer, but this was not common elsewhere. One child at Parc, speaking about frontline officers, said:

> 'Here you get the feeling that people are actually here to care for you, whereas at [name of another establishment] they don't really bother.'

6.4 How staff greeted and spoke to children was viewed as important. Across all YOIs staff predominately addressed children using their first names. Children also appreciated staff using shortened versions of their names or nicknames; one child said it 'makes the bond a bit closer'. However, a few children said staff continuously mispronounced their name or used the wrong version. Staff told us it was difficult to remember all of the children's names when they were constantly being moved to work on different units.

6.5 Supporting children's mental health was also viewed as an example of providing care. One child at Wetherby who had suffered multiple bereavements felt cared for because officers had regular supportive chats with him, facilitated more time out of cell and referred him to mental health support.

6.6 Awareness of a child's interests, educational achievement and family life was also fundamental to children's feelings of care. However, most children we spoke to did not think staff knew much about them on a personal level. Impressively at Parc, children said staff worked closely with families and regularly spoke to them during visits. At Wetherby there were also notable examples of staff staying late to contact

children's families, and one child, who had become a parent while in the YOI, said staff had arranged an extended private visit with toys and games so they could meet their son for the first time. However, few children said they knew officers well enough to talk to them about their lives outside of the establishment, their personal interests or their hopes for the future.

6.7 Some staff referred to caring as being a professional parental figure. One staff member at Werrington described taking a guardian role and teaching children life skills such as how to properly make their bed. Others described having conversations with the children that mothers would have with them, such as offering support with relationship break-ups. Children also referred to some officers as a 'second mum' and said they treated them 'like their own kids', while still setting boundaries and rules.

6.8 Children felt closest to officers who they felt genuinely empathised with them and gave honest advice. Children said things like: 'she genuinely does care, she genuinely does understand what I'm going through' and 'he is from the same background as me, Caribbean and understands the struggle and stuff'.

6.9 The impact of caring relationships was two-fold in YOIs. Staff told us that 'when the lads are happy, staff are happy', and children at Parc said '[when] they are that good with you that you hold that respect so that if they ask you to bang up, you bang up'. There were many examples given by children and staff at all YOIs of trusting relationships which enabled officers to deescalate challenging behaviour, for example fights, talking children down from incidents at height, or to assist with suicide or self-harm prevention.

6.10 Despite this, there was a fundamental difference between what children and staff told us builds trust – enough time to get to know one another, consistency of staff and the daily routine and staff being able to reliably resolve problems for children – and the practice we found. The challenge for the youth justice system is how to design and run settings in which positive, caring and effective relationships between frontline staff and children are supported, so they can begin to make up for the damaging start many children have experienced and prepare them to live successfully in the community when they are released.

Appendix I Methodology

Data collection began on Monday 2 September 2024 and was carried out in three YOI establishments holding children in both England and Wales.

YOI	Operator	Location
Parc	Private – G4S	Bridgend, South Wales
Werrington	YCS	Stoke-on-Trent
Wetherby and Keppel	YCS	West Yorkshire

There were two key elements at each site: a case file analysis and on-site fieldwork. In addition to data collected for the specific purpose of this review we have also made use of HMI Prisons' surveys of children. Further information about these surveys can be found on the HMI Prisons website at: Detainee survey – HM Inspectorate of Prisons.

Case file analysis

A case file review template was developed to collect key information on the delivery of CuSP and behaviour management processes for a representative sample of children.

On 2 September 2024 a random sample of cases was drawn by HMI Prisons researchers from a P-NOMIS population list for all three establishments. A statistical formula with a 95% confidence interval and a sampling error of 7% was used to calculate the sample size. This is the minimum sample size required to make sure that the findings are representative of the entire population of the establishments. The table below sets out how the sample of 113 cases was distributed across the three sites, along with the population of the establishment on 2 September 2024.

YOI	Population on 2 September 2024	Number of cases reviewed
Parc	23	10
Werrington	93	40
Wetherby and Keppel	151	63

The following information was collected from P-NOMIS and the Youth Justice Application Framework (YJAF) from each case covering the period 1 June to 31 August 2024:

- background information, including demographic information and key dates such as the date of arrival at the establishment
- delivery of CuSP, including the number of sessions delivered within the set time period, as well as assessments on the quality of the provision

- behaviour management, including the number of positive and negative incentives scheme entries, who they were given by and an assessment of their quality.

The data collected was analysed, to highlight the range of delivery across the three sites, as well as pull out any positive practice. This analysis has been used throughout this report.

On-site fieldwork

The following activities were conducted at each of the three sites in September 2024:

- individual interviews with children
- individual interviews with officers and members of staff
- group discussions with officers and custodial managers.

The interviews with children and officers, and the group discussions with officers and other staff, covered the following areas:

- what makes a good officer
- care and respect from officers
- contact and relationships with unit officers
- delivery of CuSP
- experiences of behaviour management
- engagement with the regime.

A semi-structured methodology enabled children and staff to describe their experiences in their own words and allowed them to focus on the topics that were of most importance to them. Interviewers were also able to ask follow-up questions to get more detail about specific experiences and concerns.

- **Interviews with children.** Children included in the one-to-one interviews were selected to make sure as diverse a group as possible were represented. Prospective participants were informed of the purpose of the thematic beforehand and were invited to take part in an interview. A reserve list was also drawn up should anyone in the initial selection decline to participate. A total of 25 interviews were conducted across the three prisons.

  With the consent of children the interviews were audio-recorded. Having a full audio recording of the interview, rather than relying on interviewer notes, allowed for a more rigorous approach to analysis, and the inclusion of verbatim quotes throughout this report. These audio recordings and notes were summarised to facilitate thematic analysis, and direct quotations were also included in the summaries.

- **Individual interviews and discussion groups with officers.** Interviews and staff discussion groups focused on the same areas as the children's interviews to enable triangulation of findings, and included questions about training they had received and ongoing support from managers and other services to enable them to fulfil their role. A total of 12 interviews and nine

discussion groups were conducted with staff across the three establishments prisons.

A thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key themes from both the interactions with children and staff. For the children's interviews there was a focus on retaining the voices of the participants throughout the process of analysis. Verbatim quotes and case studies have also been used to illustrate themes and provide more detailed information on the specific experiences of children and staff.

In addition to these interviews and group discussions the following activities were carried out at each of the three establishments:

- **Meetings with managers,** including the governors, directors and other senior leaders to understand what the establishment as a whole was doing to support children and staff.
- **Review of key data and policies,** including information on staffing levels and training, the delivery of CuSP and other establishment context.
- **Observation of activities on units,** including movements and domestic and association times.

The findings from all of these data sources, as well as the case file analysis, was triangulated to reach our overall findings.

The review was conducted in line with HM Inspectorate of Prisons' ethical principles for research activities.

Inspectors paid particular attention to the well-being of the detainees we spoke to, reporting any safeguarding concerns to prison staff, and adhered to the Inspectorate's safeguarding protocol for children, available at: How we inspect – HM Inspectorate of Prisons

Appendix II Glossary

Custodial manager
The most senior uniformed officers in an establishment, managing activities, people and resources, often across multiple departments.

Custody support plan (CuSP)
A care planning process for children and young people in custody, designed to support their rehabilitation needs and resettlement plans. A specific officer should be assigned to the child as their main point of contact throughout their time in custody.

Framework for integrated care
A set of guiding principles and practices aimed at improving the quality of care and outcomes for children and young people in custody.

Incentives scheme
Used to encourage good behaviour, providing a system of privileges that can be earned or lost based on conduct.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs
A psychological theory that proposes human motivation is based on fulfilling a hierarchy of five basic needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation.

Resettlement worker
Works directly with the young person, their family, and other professionals involved to ensure a smooth transition and address any barriers to successful resettlement in the community.

Youth Custody Service
Responsible for the operational running of (public sector) sites across youth secure estate, for children and young people between 10–17 in England and Wales.

Young offender institution
A type of secure accommodation that children may be placed in if they are in custody. Young offender institutions hold boys aged 15–17.

Appendix III Acknowledgements

This thematic inspection was carried out by:

Angus Jones, team leader
David Foot, inspector
Angela Johnson, inspector
Esra Sari, inspector
Alicia Grassom, researcher
Helen Ranns, researcher

We would like to thank everyone who took part, in particular the children and frontline staff living and working in young offender institutions.

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Printed and published by:
HM Inspectorate of Prisons
3rd floor
10 South Colonnade
Canary Wharf
London
E14 4PU
England

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