Child First? Examining children's perspectives of their 'effective' collaboration in youth justice decision-making

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Child First?

Examining children's perspectives of their 'effective' collaboration in youth justice decision-making

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Biographies

Stephen Case is Professor of Youth Justice at Loughborough University. His research and scholarship focus on the promotion of positive, 'children first', rights-based and anti-risk management approaches to working with children in conflict with the law. In addition to over 60 academic journal articles, he has published numerous books including 'Youth Justice: A Critical Introduction' (Case 2021 – Routledge), 'Positive Youth Justice: Children First, Offenders Second' (Haines and Case 2015 – Policy Press) and 'Understanding Youth Offending: Risk Factor Research, Policy and Practice' (Case and Haines 2009 – Routledge). Professor Case has conducted funded research for the Youth Justice Board, UKRI, the Home Office, the Welsh Government, the ESRC, the Leverhulme Trust and the Nuffield Foundation.

Dr Kathy Hampson worked for several years as a case manager for a large city Youth Justice Service (YJS), completing her PhD whilst there, researching the emotional intelligence of children who offend (whilst also working for the University of Birmingham on their distance learning Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties MEd). After relocating to North Wales, she worked for the charity Llamau in a hybrid strategy/research project looking at YJS practice around the resettlement of children leaving custody. She is now a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Aberystwyth University, where she continues researching into and writing on youth justice matters (in particular Youth Justice Systems).

Andrea Nisbet is a Research Associate at Loughborough University working on a Nuffield Foundation funded project: *Child First? Examining children's perspectives of their 'effective' collaboration in youth justice decision-making.* Before joining Loughborough she worked at the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS) at Manchester Metropolitan University, on research projects including 'The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic' and the 'Implementation and Delivery of Community Resolutions'. Prior to her academic career she worked in local government for over twenty years. Experience includes providing strategic support to Youth Justice Services and Children's Social Care, using a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods to evaluate and inform evidence-based practice, and developing and implementing performance management and quality assurance frameworks and reporting mechanisms.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This Child First research project was commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation to gain a greater understanding of what children think about their collaboration in youth justice decision-making processes. Participation and engagement of children in youth justice processes and practice is vital, particularly since the Youth Justice Board's adoption of Child First justice as its guiding principle and key strategic objective. Child First is an evidence-based framework for working with children incorporating four tenets: see children as children; develop pro-social identity for positive child outcomes; collaboration with children and promoting diversion away from the justice system. The focus for this project is the third tenet, 'collaboration with children'.

Purpose

Children's voices have traditionally been neglected within youth justice policy, practice and research, which have mainly been undertaken and developed by adults for adults. Consequently this project sought to re-address this imbalance with its child-focus of facilitating children to share their genuine perspectives and experiences of their involvement in decision-making processes. The study explored children's collaboration in decisions affecting them at all stages of the Youth Justice System and focused on four interconnected research questions relating to: **collaboration understandings, collaboration objectives, collaboration effectiveness and collaboration practise development.**

Methodology

The qualitative methodological framework of **Participatory Interpretivism** was chosen, which prioritises co-constructing the research with justice-involved children to ensure child-centric, Child First, co-creation of all research elements. Two different sample groups of justice-involved children were identified from a range of community and custodial settings, in order to address the research questions through participatory and co-created methods and analyses:

> *Project Reference Group* (*PRG*) of justice-experienced children (n= 22) collaborating together with researchers throughout the life of the project to co-create the project design (including exploring creative methods), implementation processes and interpretation of findings, recruited from one hosting Youth Justice Service (YJS).

> *Research Participant Children* (n = 66) recruited from six geographically and institutionally diverse research sites to take part in *system journey interviews and* complete *digital/paper diaries* for reflecting on involvement within- and between-stages of the Youth Justice System (3 x youth justice services, 2 x youth offending institutions and 1 x secure children's home).

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Findings provided a rich description and interpretation of children's views from the PRG sessions and interviews undertaken with participant children at the research fieldwork sites.

PRG session observations highlighted the development of the project methodology throughout the fieldwork to:
✓ ensure child-friendly, child appropriate ways of communicating with children about the research concepts and questions
✓ trial creative activities/methods to neutralise power dynamics and encourage engagement
✓ interpret research findings from the participant sample to provide an opportunity for children to discuss, challenge and validate emerging themes and sub-themes
✓ disseminate research findings – children chose a pre-recorded rap backing track and, using quotes from participants and their own words, recorded a full rap song in a professional studio.

Participant children sample findings in relation to the research questions:
✓ identified what children considered to be the essential elements of 'collaboration', summarised as being encouraged to engage in respectful conversations, being spoken to appropriately, being provided with clear information and having their views considered and taken into account
✓ revealed that children wanted professionals to ask them about their aspirations, listen to what they were saying and offer support to help them to achieve their goals so they could move forward with their life
✓ indicated that effective collaboration practice needs to be based around building authentic, positive, non-hierarchical relationships with professionals who cared about them, in a comfortable environment, to facilitate the development of effective and relevant support
✓ identified the main areas for practice development which they believed would improve Child First practice as:
    o wanting professionals to listen to children and their ideas for improvement
    o acknowledging and breaking down power imbalances by creating child-friendly environments
    o keeping children continually informed throughout their involvement with youth justice agencies
    o involving children in decision-making about them at both strategic and practice levels to benefit their experience and improve outcomes across the whole of the Youth Justice System

Furthermore, findings revealed that children's experiences of Child First collaboration practice are inconsistent, with some parts of the Youth Justice System better than others. For YJSs, collaboration experiences were generally positive; within custody, it varied depending on the establishment and incentive scheme level; whilst interactions and engagement with the police, courts and children's social care services were mostly negative. A discussion of the findings provides an overview of the main themes/sub-themes developed and an exploration of how they consolidate and extend existing knowledge related to children's collaboration and youth justice decision making and children's views of effective youth justice collaboration practice.

Overview of Recommendations

The report concludes with a number of recommendations identifying where children have indicated practice needs further development, and where their experiences have indicated barriers to their effective collaboration.

Recommendations for *all* agencies associated with youth justice, including: YJSs, Courts, Police, Custodial institutions, Solicitors

- **Recommendation 1:** Collaboration within all agencies needs to include ALL FOUR key collaborative elements identified by children: asking children their opinions, listening to children, respecting children's views and keeping children informed

- **Recommendation 2:** Children's *self-identified goals and aspirations* need to inform all youth justice interventions and activities

- **Recommendation 3:** Children need to be actively involved in youth justice decision-making at all levels

- **Recommendation 4:** Youth justice personnel need to actively facilitate effective collaboration and neutralise power imbalances including child-friendly environments and utilising creative activities

- **Recommendation 5:** Collaboration needs to be consistent across the *whole* Youth Justice System, recognising the 'collaboration' tenet of Child First as the facilitator of all the other tenets

- **Recommendation 6:** To fully embed Child First into youth justice, all policy and practice guidance bodies need to include collaboration principles into their processes

- **Recommendation 7:** Providers of youth justice services are invited to contribute ideas towards, and make use of, the practitioner pack, which will be distributed as part of this project. (e.g., practitioner training, posters for youth justice spaces, link to the rap recorded by members of the project PRG containing the words of some of the research participants). The pack will be made available on the YJB Resource Hub and sent to all YJS managers.

Recommendations for *specific* agencies associated with youth justice

- **Recommendation 8: Police** services should examine their own practice, according to the principles of good collaboration identified in this report that align to the National Police Chief's Council (2024) Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy 2024 – 2027

- **Recommendation 9: Courts** should examine their own practice, according to the principles of good collaboration identified in this report, including how children can be meaningfully facilitated to be involved in sentencing decision and ensuring child-friendly environments

- **Recommendation 10: All custodial provision** for children should be Child First in approach, facilitated by robust practice supporting collaboration with children (e.g., creating a Child First environment, ensuring that initiatives to become involved in decision-making are available to all, ensuring that all four stages of collaboration are followed for both individual children and those involved in organised initiatives)

Recommendations for academics embarking on youth justice research

- **Recommendation 11:** Ensure that the voice of the justice-involved child is incorporated into all research into youth justice matters to be sure that findings do not privilege adult-centric approaches, assumptions, knowledge and understanding

- **Recommendation 12:** Incorporate some level of child involvement in the conception, development, execution and dissemination of youth justice-related research, to better incorporate children into its heart

- **Recommendation 13:** Commission future research to further examine the cross-agency complexities raised by this project by conducting an in-depth examination into individual youth justice agencies, particularly the police and courts, incorporating recommendations 11 and 12

Contents

Introduction

The number of children (10-17 years) entering the Youth Justice System of England and Wales has been falling annually for several years (MoJ/YJB 2024), but those remaining have increasingly complex, multiple, and often unmet needs (Youth Justice Board/YJB 2024). However, understanding and responding to these children through the lens of 'risk' (management) precludes their 'meaningful' participation in youth justice processes by privileging top-down, adult-centric practice and marginalising children's own experiences/perspectives. Criticisms of systemic issues, inequitable power dynamics and the anti-child nature of risk management, combined with emerging evidence-bases and evolving views about children who offend, have catalysed a significant youth justice paradigm/culture shift, introducing 'Child First' as the 'guiding principle and strategic objective' for the Youth Justice System (YJB, 2021, p. 10). Despite the Child First principle being adopted by the YJB, there remains an inconsistent policy and practice response from youth justice agencies in actively promoting and implementing this approach that will be highlighted in the discussion of findings and addressed as part of the recommendations. Child First is grounded in four tenets[1] that have been highlighted as 'effective' in research and practice internationally (Case and Browning, 2021; Case and Hazel 2023):

1. **See children as children**: Prioritise the best interests of children, recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential. All work is child-focused, developmentally informed, acknowledges structural barriers and meets responsibilities towards children.

2. **Develop pro-social identity for positive child outcomes**: Promote children's individual strengths and capacities as a means of developing their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance, leading to safer communities and fewer victims. All work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society.

3. **Collaboration with children**: Encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers.

4. **Promote diversion**: Promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using pre-emptive prevention, diversion and minimal intervention. All work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system.

Collaboration with children: Encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers.

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[1] The YJB operationalised 'Child First' (YJB, 2018) by amalgamating the central features of the 'Positive Youth Justice' model of practice (child-friendly, diversionary, promotional, legitimate, engaging, responsibilising adults – Case, 2015) and those of the 'Constructive Resettlement approach (constructive, co-created, customised, consistent, co-ordinated - Hazel and Bateman, 2021).

This new focus for youth justice in England and Wales centralises, at least in principle, the active *collaboration* (tenet 3) of children with practitioners to co-create their youth justice experience. Specifically, they should be encouraged into 'active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion' (YJB 2021, p. 6). However, involving children in meaningful collaboration within youth justice spaces is challenging, especially given the contested nature of this (and related) terminology (Hampson et al., 2024). It is not simply about providing *opportunities* for participation (although in some youth justice contexts, these are rare), but also ensuring the conditions to enable children to engage (e.g., believe in, commit to, involve themselves in) with these opportunities in ways which genuinely affect the outcomes. Although youth justice practice is slowly waking up to the need to include children in processes affecting them, youth justice *research* has, perhaps surprisingly, lagged behind. Rarely are children involved in the processes of research to ensure that ensuing findings genuinely reflect their voice and experience, rather than adult-centric interpretations, and yet this should be a key development in completing the circle for a truly Child First justice context. This research project explores the potential for children who offend to collaborate meaningfully, not only in youth justice processes affecting them (e.g., decision-making, planning, evaluation), but also in youth justice-focused research which informs the shaping of policy.

Adult-centric youth justice as a barrier to children's participation

The voices of justice-involved children have often been neglected across history. Consequently, youth justice policies and practices have been developed *by* adults, *for* adults, devoid of meaningful input from children. Power imbalances persist as the process is often controlled by adults who determine and conceptualise the nature of, and beliefs about, childhood (Hine, 2010). An example of the belief of childhood is, rather than viewing children as fully 'rational actors', they can perhaps be better understood/explained as thinking and behaving 'in the moment'; the ability of foreseeing the consequences of their (offending) behaviour is often limited dependent on their mood, their age, their (neuro) maturity and their social context (Haines, et al., 2021). Moreover, understanding and responding to justice-involved children through the lens of 'risk' (management) has precluded and obstructed their 'meaningful' participation in youth justice processes by privileging top-down, adult-centric, interventionist practice whilst marginalising children's experiences and perspectives. However, with the development of Child First justice, the emphasis has now been firmly placed on the necessity to realise collaboration in practice. Justice-involved children therefore not only have the *right* to participate in decisions about their care and supervision, including to express agency, communicate their priorities and offer insight into their thoughts and feelings on matters which concern them (United Nations, 1989), but also now have the *policy imperative* in Child First 'collaboration'. Despite this, there are significant practical barriers to progressing children's meaningful collaboration and participation in *youth justice* decision-making processes and research that must be addressed if co-creation is to be realised in practice, including:

- ***Vulnerability and perceived inability***: Children may feel ill-equipped, lacking necessary skills and abilities (perpetuated by practitioner and researcher opinions/assumptions) to engage honestly about their emotional health and well-being needs and contribute meaningfully to the design, commissioning, and delivery of the services they are receiving. This is also likely to affect their

perception of how useful their insights/contributions are for researchers designing youth justice studies, all of which threatens their *control* and *voice*. Moreover, viewing children as vulnerable, disadvantaged, with limited-life chances and in need of protection, can result in the perception that they are unable/incapable of influencing decision-making processes (Deakin et al., 2020). Essentially, children may not be perceived as credible 'knowers', capable of engaging in discussions related to their care and supervision arrangements or in how to frame research methodology to maintain an authentic child's voice (Winter, 2015, p. 205), which might limit the level and nature of *information* and *support* they are given. Whilst they may well require *support* to fully engage with such processes, this should not negate or limit their involvement.

- ***Knowledge and expertise***: Children may feel unqualified or unable to contest or contribute to youth justice decisions and power*less* to question the judgement of those wielding power and influence. This situation is exacerbated if they are not then given sufficient accessible *information* using language they understand. These experiences can result in children feeling *dis*empowered and *dis*engaged (Creaney, 2020), leading to loss of *voice* and *choice*. For example, children may be reluctant to speak out if they feel they are being treated unfairly because of fear of the consequences of potentially being returned to court for non-compliance. Furthermore, children may feel that they lack enough knowledge to make decisions, or influence research design. In this context, children's experiential knowledge may be considered 'of less value' (Winter, 2015, p. 197) when compared to professional expertise (Deakin et al., 2020), despite the fact that they hold *unique* knowledge potentially unknowable by professionals in either youth justice practice or research (Brierley, 2023). Consequently, children may adopt a passive stance to demands and expectations; a strategy deployed to avoid complications, from a child's perspective increasing the possibility of a smoother transition out of the system and its perceivably inconvenient processes – all of which may reduce their motivation to get meaningfully involved in youth justice processes.

- ***Power-based, hierarchical relationships***: Adult practitioners and researchers may struggle to relinquish control over processes, systems and strategies, threatening the *control* a *child* may have in decision-making. Adults may also feel that they have insufficient time to nurture child-led practices and constrained by bureaucratic systems to 'facilitate practices which build relationality, and which allow trust to develop' (Hughes et al., 2014, p. 6). These heightened anxieties can encourage restrictive, oppressive and risk-reduction strategies/techniques (Farrow et al., 2007), implicitly or explicitly devaluing and undermining children's agency and autonomy in youth justice processes and research. Research and practice with children is inherently unequal and usually framed by adult-constructed agendas. Despite accepting that power inequities cannot be entirely eradicated in research and practice with children (Loymere, 2019), they can be acknowledged and then minimised through adopting a 'lesser adult role' (Hogan, 2017, p. 256), striving to work more equitably to empower marginalised children to tell their stories and express opinions about services impacting them (McGinnis and O'Shea, 2022). Therefore, forging non-hierarchical, more equitable relationships with children as contexts for effective research and practice (see Sutton et al., 2022) necessitates a

bold, courageous commitment to breaking down power inequalities and focusing on co-creation of knowledge, with professionals receptive to 'knowledge from below' activism from children (Burns, 2019, Smithson et al., 2020).

Consequently, the 'effectiveness' of Child First tenets and youth justice practice more generally is typically operationalised by adult professionals (e.g., as reductions in re/offending - MoJ/YJB, 2021; improved practitioner treatment of children –-Smith, 2020). Such adult-centrism neglects understandings/measures of what *children* might find meaningful/helpful or effective, solicited and accessed through collaborative research and practice processes. Research has examined children's lived *experiences* of policy/practice at various *individual stages* of the Youth Justice System, such as bail/remand (McAlistair and Carr, 2017), out-of-court (Kelly and Armitage, 2015), court (Centre for Justice Intervention, 2020), Youth Justice Service (YJS)[2] practice (Creaney, 2020), custody/resettlement (Hazel and Bateman, 2020). In this research project and report, we consolidate and extrapolate this evidence-base in a number of important conceptual and practical areas, offering professional stakeholders a critical evidence source for developing child-centric, collaborative, bottom-up, positive youth justice approaches *with* children across all stages of youth justice involvement:

- **Scope**: examining children's experiences/perspectives of youth justice journeys *system-wide*, rather than restricted to specific stages;

- **Collaboration**: exploring children's experiences/perspectives of collaboration during youth justice journeys, particularly participation/engagement with *decision-making processes* (e.g., regarding sentencing, diversion, assessment, intervention planning);

- **Effective practice**: eliciting children's *understandings/views of effective youth justice practice*, rather than simply enabling consultation/participation in adult-centric processes;

- **Co-creation**: utilising methods of co-creation at *every stage of the research process* (design-delivery-analysis-interpretation-dissemination), prioritising in-built reflexive and creative communication methods (Aldridge, 2017);

- **Policy/practice development:** collaborative, co-created evidence will enable situated, valid understandings of children's experiences/perspectives of youth justice journeys, which can inform cutting-edge policy/practice development (e.g., emerging guidance for implementing Child First).

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[2] The original legislation (Crime and Disorder Act 1998) set up multiagency Youth Offending Teams (generally then referred to as YOTs), but more recently, the sector has moved away from this term, in recognition of its potentially labelling effect. Therefore acronym **'YJS'** will be used throughout this document to refer to 'Youth Justice Services' as this terminology is now generally used throughout the Youth Justice System by official bodies, e.g., The YJB and the HMIP Inspectorate (although it should be noted that one of the quotes from a child (and the PRG rap) retains the word 'YOT').

These foci will build on existing evidence of how children (passively) experience or 'feel' justice/interventions (McAlistair and Carr, 2017) and the value they place on 'procedural fairness' (e.g., fair treatment, having a voice, trusting adult decisions) by explicitly addressing recommendations for experiential research to focus on neglected issues, including: children's (active) perceptions of youth justice *processes* (Kelly and Armitage, 2015), the importance of unlocking children's participative potential as experts by experience (Creaney, 2020) and the efficacy of co-creating supportive, inclusive youth justice interventions (Hazel and Bateman, 2020).

Collaboration Definition

In its definition of Child First collaboration, the YJB identified this as to 'Encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion' (YJB, 2024: 7), which should, crucially, be realised in every aspect of their youth justice experience. However, collaboration is a contested concept, lacking agreement on what it is or what it should look like. This ambiguity is exacerbated by a range of terms being used interchangeably without much critical thought as to what they mean, resulting in very inconsistent understanding and application (Peer Power/YJB, 2021). 'Collaboration' is an umbrella term encompassing a range of different *levels* of influence, seemingly with an inverse relationship between depth/breadth of child involvement/influence and frequency of use (the lighter the child involvement, the more often an approach is deployed) (Hampson et al., 2024). As the YJB's Child First strategic approach specifically uses 'collaboration', this project will also adopt that language.

Under this umbrella term, the elements are understood as follows:

Engagement – (most often utilised) taking part in activities, but with no other type of involvement, which risks losing the voice of the child. The child, having had no input into what happens to them, is less likely to experience interventions and plans as useful to them.

Participation - the child takes a fuller role in the process, perhaps being consulted, encompassing some level of empowerment; but it could be that the *decision-making* actually happens elsewhere, whilst purporting to take into account the child's opinions. For this to be meaningful, children need to be actively involved in processes/decision-making affecting them (not passive receivers of adult-executed decisions) and able to see how their opinions have affected what then happens.

Co-production – involves child in the planning and design of what happens/is delivered to ensure relevance and interest. For this to be authentic, their opinions need to shape the subsequent processes and plans.

Co-creation – (least used) ideas/proposals originate from children (rather than originating from adults), with children then fully involved in planning and decision-making. This helps address power dynamics, and encourages practice which values children's and practitioners' knowledge *equally* (which also assumes a close working relationship between practitioner and child).

Each of the above aspects of collaboration *may* be valuable at different stages and in different circumstances, but this should not be an excuse to remain at the lower echelons of engagement and (partial) participation. It is important also that the child is given a choice on their *level* of involvement, including the right to *not* be involved at all if that is what they want (avoiding 'participation' at any cost) (Charles et al., 2024). Some children may want to take part in development of national policy, with others happy to have a voice in their own plan.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodology adopted to explore the key research questions for the project. They were addressed through an overarching qualitative design utilising participatory interpretivism, whilst simultaneously developing an innovative methodology to identify how justice-involved children can be facilitated to use their voice throughout the design and execution of research concerning them. The approach applied flexible, non-hierarchical methods of co-creation at every stage of the research process. Barriers to access and enablers of engagement to participatory research are presented, before ending with ethical considerations for the project.

Research Questions

The study aimed to examine children's experiences and perspectives of Youth Justice System-wide journeys, exploring their collaboration, particularly participation and engagement with decision-making processes, and eliciting children's understandings and views of effective youth justice practice. Evidence and conclusions from our research project have informed recommendations to influence progressive Youth Justice System policy and practice development. Our specific questions were:

1. **Collaboration understandings:** How do children perceive and understand their collaboration in the decision-making processes that underpin responses to their offending across the Youth Justice System?

2. **Collaboration objectives**: What do children believe should be the objectives of their collaboration in decision-making processes? Do these perceived objectives/benefits differ to those held by adult professionals – if so, how and why?

3. **Effectiveness:** How do children perceive and experience 'effective' collaboration practice, such as the effectiveness of processes and how collaboration outcomes should be measured?

4. **Practice development**: What is the extent and nature of children's 'Child First' (e.g., child-centric, collaborative, promotional/positive, diversionary) youth justice experiences (e.g., of decision-making processes) and how could these be improved?

Research Design: Participatory Interpretivism

The following diagram (Figure 1) presents the over-arching qualitative design adopted to support the study and includes the sampling structure and processes, data collection, the use of creative methods, findings and data analysis leading to conclusions and recommendations. In this section, each of these elements is discussed in turn, providing a rationale and description of how this approach was applied.

Figure 1: Overarching Qualitative Design

This research design aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of children's perspectives of collaborative interactions, rather than purportedly more 'generalisable', aggregated, positivist models based on null hypothesis significance testing and reliance on statistics. The research tools chosen provided opportunities for participants to tell their own stories, share feelings, give examples of decision-making about matters affecting them, and specify their views of what constitutes effective practice, whilst suggesting changes to develop practice. This qualitative design facilitated the production of rich data to address the four inter-related research questions from a child's perspective.

It promotes meaningful engagement with participants for centre-staging collaboration with, and inclusion and emancipation of, vulnerable, marginalised children throughout the research process, thus developing children's status from 'participant as actor' into a more transformative 'participant-led' approach.
(Aldridge, 2017).

The qualitative methodological framework of *Participatory Interpretivism* was chosen, which prioritises co-constructing research through partnerships with researchers and stakeholders, recognising their expertise and lived experience (Vaughn et al., 2020). It promotes meaningful engagement with participants for centre-staging collaboration with, and inclusion and emancipation of, vulnerable, marginalised children throughout the research process, thus developing children's status from 'participant as actor' (Aldridge, 2015 p. 151). into a more transformative 'participant-led' approach (ibid p. 155). This methodological process recognises children's competence as 'social actors' able to 'contribute and generate knowledge and ...

shape the research findings with their expertise' (Cuevas-Parra, 2020, p. 4). Moreover, it challenges the traditional research model at all stages, recognising the lived experiences of the children involved in research and the transformation of power dynamics (Campos and Anderson, 2021). Participatory research has been utilised for some decades in other academic disciplines, for example education (see Lundy, 2007; Fenge et al., 2011; Campos and Anderson, 2021), childhood studies (see Holland et al., 2010; Eldon, 2012; Horgan, 2017), psychology and health (see Blacker et al., 2008; Gibbs et al., 2018), children's rights (Herbots and Put, 2015). Evidently a wide variety of resourceful activities have been used with children involved in research using imaginative and inventive methods which could be utilised more widely through cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas (Cooper, 2022).

This study's methodology builds on pockets of evolving innovative and progressive youth justice participatory research that have materialised in recent years. These have developed through a variety of collaborative formats including the work of Social Justice Charities, Social Partnership Trusts, Research Centres and other social partnership enterprises (e.g., Peer Power, Leaders Unlocked, Youth-Ink, Greater Manchester Youth Justice University Partnership [GMYJUP], Children and Young People's Centre for Justice [CYPCJ] Scotland (who describe themselves as a 'boundary-spanning intermediary organisation'; Stocks-Rankin, 2020, p. 1)). These organisations have been established to support collaborative opportunities in the public sector (including youth justice) to generate knowledge and influence public policy and practice change. They all offer leadership roles for children and young adults with lived experience of the Youth Justice System and have been involved in a wide range of projects including strategy, service and organisational development, research, training and coaching initiatives, developing resources, providing advice and guidance to the sector and campaigning for change. They see children as the solution, recognising their lived-experience potential for influencing positive change in systems as well as the benefit of individual change through supporting their well-being and personal development (e.g., leadership roles, mentors, campaigners).

Two research projects that specifically focused on youth justice participation and co-creation with children were from the GMYJUP (established in 2014 with the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS) and Greater Manchester Youth Justice Services) and one from the youth-led organisation Peer Power, commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (YJB). The former led to the development of the Participatory Youth Practice (PYP) Framework (Smithson et al., 2020) and worked with professional facilitators and justice-involved children using instructed creative workshops of boxing, grime lyric writing and urban art to co-create the framework. This resulted in eight theoretically informed principles: the right to participate, always unpick why, acknowledging limited life chances, avoiding threats and sanctions, helping to problem solve, finding better options, developing ambitions and recognising that ultimately, it's their choice (ibid., p. 3). These principles provide guidance for youth justice practice in supporting participation and engagement with justice-involved children, and are now utilised across Youth Justice Services (YJS) in the Greater Manchester region (Smithson et al., 2023).

The Peer Power Project was a joint research project undertaken with children who had lived youth justice experience, with the YJB and researchers working in collaboration 'to understand the complex cultural and

environmental factors' in action and how participation and co-creation may operate in a youth justice context (Peer Power/YJB, 2021, p. 8). Their research culminated in five key themes: Relate and Connect, Visible and Experiential Power and Inclusion, Strengths and Positivity, Resources (money, time and more), Rights and Readiness (Peer Power/YJB, 2021, p. 66). These ideas underpin effective participatory practice and co-creation, with key recommendations given for youth justice practice to build momentum and nurture positive change, and further recommendations for the YJB to use their influence to support practice change across the Youth Justice System by introducing minimum participatory standards.

These projects recognise the importance of children's right to participate, promote a strengths-based approach, build positive professional-child relationships, and emphasise the power dynamics, hierarchy and inequities of children's ability to be involved and influence decision-making affecting them, whilst fostering aspirations for their future whole-life journey. Consequently, they acknowledge barriers to progress, including that practitioners do not always prioritise children's right to participate in decision-making, participation often being seen as a separate exercise and not embedded in practice, and risk/enforcement remaining central to practice in many cases (Smithson et al., 2022). There needs to be a culture-shift in how YJSs operate to enable further system-wide change, acknowledging that change will take time, as well as requiring progressive leadership and staff training/guidance to achieve participatory goals (Peer Power/YJB, 2021; Smithson et al., 2023). These projects have co-produced a range of resources, materials, and guidance for youth justice professionals to support the embedding of a more collaborative approach with justice-involved children, to systematically incorporate their views in all matters affecting them.

Some YJSs have made more progress than others in this developing area of practice, taking advantage of the YJB's Child First pathfinder project grants. For example, the Lancashire YJS 'Participation in Practice Strategy' (2022) which was produced collaboratively between children and practitioners, is grounded in children's rights and outlines their participation offer to children. A further example benefitting from the YJB's Child First pathfinder funding is Sandwell YJS (2023) working in partnership with Wolverhampton University and justice-involved children, to develop and embed creative approaches within their service delivery. These projects have also produced training guides and tools for staff to support embedding participatory practice and co-creation (Lancashire County Council, 2022; Caufield et al., 2023).

These examples are not a definitive list of all models and activities but provide a range of examples outlining development in the field of participation and co-creation from a youth justice perspective, as 'the true picture of engagement across the whole range of youth justice experience is unclear' (Hampson and Case, in press). The learning from these evolving ideas has guided and informed our 'choice points that require decisions about which tools and methods will produce the desired level of participation at each stage of the research process' (Vaughn et al., 2020, p. 1). Whilst 'there is no off-the shelf formular, step-by-step method or 'correct' way to do participatory research' (Fenge et al., 2011, p. 425), our model has embraced core principles of participatory inquiry, including being cognisant of participant's rights and needs and working collaboratively with a population that is often dismissed and deprived of contributing to the decision-making process (Creaney, 2019; Smithson et al., 2020). Additionally this method acknowledges children's *unique* knowledge

potentially unknowable by professionals in either youth justice practice or research (Brierley, 2023). Moreover, children were involved in dialogue about all stages of the research design; participants were given opportunities to reflect on their engagement in the project; data collated and/or produced by participants was subject to different kinds of analyses, interpretation and reflexive processes, and ethical issues were continually considered throughout the research process (Aldridge, 2016).

Additionally, the project empowered marginalised children to tell their stories and express their opinions on matters affecting them, acknowledging that power inequalities cannot be entirely eradicated in research with children (Lohmeyer, 2019). The researchers strived to address power differentials by working on an equitable basis, offering children a real choice and opportunities of engagement, and providing an enriching and impactful experience for all involved. At the same time, the researchers needed to be continually responsive and flexible in the most challenging of environments to achieve the research aims (McGinnis and O'Shea, 2022). Furthermore, the researchers were cognisant of,

> **… the project empowered marginalised children to tell their stories and express their opinions on matters affecting them, acknowledging that power inequalities cannot be entirely eradicated in research with children.**
> **(Lohmeyer, 2019).**

and negotiated the differences in, motivations between themselves and children which can present the challenge of 'parallel projects' (Lohmeyer, 2019, p. 40), whereby researchers arrive at the encounter with the purpose of conducting their research (and activities), whilst the children had their own reasons motivating and directing either engagement or *non*-engagement in the project. Additionally, children's right to choose to disrupt or refute the participatory process challenged the researchers involved, but also acted as a way to explore the impacts and outcomes that were most significant for those children (Gibbs et al., 2018; Charles et al., 2024). The issue of power dynamics was forefront; this was mitigated by prioritising justice-experienced children's ideas, interests and views and involving them in the research design at the earliest possible stage to ensure that the project was genuinely shaped and influenced by children. Furthermore, Hampson and Case (in press) explicate 'new developments in this area need to fully explore the breadth of children involved (not just the span of research processes) to ensure involvement of children at all stages of youth justice and to incorporating a wide demographic range, including ethnicity differences and those with specific difficulties and differences, like additional learning needs and communication difficulties', which was reflected in the recruitment process of this project.

Participatory creative methods were utilised in this project to elicit children's perspectives (e.g., autobiography, storytelling, oral, visual, rap lyric writing, graffiti, sculpture and arts-based materials – according to each child's preference and skills). This facilitated closer, more collaborative researcher-participant relationships and enabled the children (as researchers) to co-analyse/reflect on co-produced data, avoiding any misrepresentation and misinterpretation of their views. Therefore, this child-centric participatory approach created opportunities for children's voices to be heard and acted upon (Johnson, 2017) in safe, inclusive, engaging research/practice environments (Horgan, 2017), which sought to utilise their strengths and abilities. The participatory nature of this study offers significant benefits for the whole youth justice sector by actively promoting the dynamic and consistent involvement of children in youth justice decision-making. This study design could, therefore, add value and advance knowledge to a framework for future expectations of children's participation, potentially changing the nature of youth justice research to privilege and centralise the voice of the child. Looking at all stages of the research process from the child's viewpoint 'has the potential to revolutionise what we 'know' about 'effectiveness' in practice, completing the circle of child participation in youth justice' (Hampson and Case, in press).

Accessing children in contact with the Youth Justice System

Two different sample groups of justice-involved children were identified from a range of community and custodial settings, in order to address the research questions through participatory and co-created methods and analyses, whilst developing this methodology further:

- *Project Reference Group* (n = 22) of justice-experienced children collaborating together in a group with researchers throughout the life of the project to co-create the project design and implementation processes, recruited from one hosting YJS (see details below for further information)
- *Research Participant Children* (n = 66) were recruited from six geographically and institutionally diverse research sites to take part in *system journey interviews* to understand their perceptions and experiences of collaboration and understandings of effective collaboration practice across the Youth Justice System, and the completion of *digital/paper diaries* for reflecting on involvement within- and between-stages of the Youth Justice System (see details below for further discussion)

Exploring Creative Methods to Enhance Participation and Engagement

Both the *PRG* and *research participant children* (those involved in the data-gathering processes) developed and explored creative approaches, through attractive, child-friendly methods maximising their own strengths and abilities (Fenge et al., 2011). These methods were utilised to elicit children's perspectives (e.g.,

autobiography, storytelling, rap lyric writing, oral, visual, sculpture, life histories and use of creative materials/activities) both on project methodology and in answering the research questions, to generate a more collaborative structure to the whole research process (Leigh, 2020). This enabled children to communicate and express themselves in a range of ways for more accessible participation where there were often language and communication difficulties within the justice-involved child population (see Coles et al., 2017 for evidence of the prevalence of speech and language difficulties in the youth justice population; Ministry of Justice/Department of Education, 2016). Creative methods were helpful for capturing thoughts and opinions, which may not easily be expressed in words, and for children who prefer non-verbal methods of communication, providing additional richness to supplement interviews (Shaw et al., 2011).

Visual and creatively focused methods were especially useful in research with children for a variety of reasons. They assisted the reflection of *complex ideas or issues*, making the process more enjoyable, and offered different ways of revealing experiences, perspectives and self-expression (Mannay, 2017). In this project, these methods helped discussion by 'distancing' an issue and supported children *to feel, think, question and share/sensate sensitive or difficult topics*, therefore enabling them to articulate experiences and feelings that rarely surface solely with talk-based approaches, facilitating wide-ranging communication so that ideas developed and new connections were made (Renold and Marston, 2020). Additionally, creative research approaches aided children by *removing the adult gaze*, helping them to narrativise (Elden, 2012), representing their daily realities and more in-depth perspectives in a way that was accessible to them, which may not have otherwise been obtained using more traditional methods (Wilkinson et al., 2022). Furthermore, creative methodologies supported *inclusive environments* opening up space for children to participate, leading to *safe and trusting connections in a calm and welcoming environment* (Creaney et al., 2023).

Creative participatory methods offered a unique way to develop *fun and inclusive engagement* with children enabling *unforeseen concepts to materialise* which supported their involvement in decision-making processes. Ptolomey and Nelson's (2022, p. 687) inspiring concept of 'methodological alchemy', introduced the need for creative methods rooted in 'ethical thinking, constantly in processes of becoming, being and unfolding'; researchers and participants 'entangled with materials exploring inclusive, desirable, fantastical, playful, future-oriented, live and in the moment, that engage senses and tactility, and create spaces for unexpected ideas to emerge'. Therefore, this approach required researchers to be *exploratory and confident with uncertainty,* embracing a variety of creative activities to aid communication and expand knowledge and be 'open to the unexpected' (Kara, 2020, p. 63). Consequently, researchers needed to ensure that chosen methods were 'neither tokenistic or patronising' and needed to consider the *age appropriateness of materials* for research activities and the risk of *stereotypical uses* (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

Creative methods, for this project, remained flexible and varied according to children's preferences as it was important for children to have real choice about how they wished to engage; they included: artwork, sculpture with playdough and plasticine, Lego-building, visual, photo/picture elicitation, creative writing, rap lyric-writing, creating 'I poems', graffiti art, use of 'talking objects', use of physical materials to develop ideas/understanding, icebreakers and team building games. Some of the methods chosen by children challenged the comfort-zone of researchers (e.g., rap music), however this enabled children to take on more of an *instructor role,* rather than relying on adult-led assumptions about activities. By using a range of creative methods, and offering children choice, the experience was made more enjoyable and relaxing for children, enabling the abstract to become concrete (Elden, 2012). Using creative methods that children enjoyed and with which they were comfortable reduced power imbalances between researcher and participant through adopting a 'lesser adult role' as researchers, building capacity in children through the research process and interrogating ethical issues (Horgan, 2017, p. 256) enabling children to speak more openly. Creative activities and approaches have supported children to explore, develop and express their ideas, feelings and emotions in a variety of youth justice settings enabling them to share perspectives of the extent, nature and impact of their meaningful collaborations and encounters within/between stages and processes of the Youth Justice System: out-of-court, court, community/YJSs, custody – YOIs/SCH, and resettlement.

PRG processes

Sampling: Project Reference Group (PRG) Sample

PRG participants were justice-involved children collaborating together in a group with researchers throughout the project to co-create the project design and implementation processes. They were selected from a large city YJS to ensure good levels of representation from children on different stages of their youth justice journey (out-of-court, court, community, custody and resettlement), with experience of various outcomes, disposal types and court orders (Outcome 22, Community Resolution, Youth Conditional Caution, Referral Order, Youth Rehabilitation Order, Detention and Training Order – released under community supervision).[3] The PRG was designed to ensure the integration of child-centric participatory methodologies across all research stages: from initial research question development, instrument selection, design and implementation, to interpretation and dissemination of findings. This was designed to enhance children's collaboration and engagement with researchers and minimise adult-centric assumptions and interpretations.

A range of different children attended creative sessions over the lifespan of the project, largely due to changes in children's individual circumstances (e.g., short orders which ended). In total 22 participated, some attending

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[3] For further details see College of Policing – Possible Justice Outcomes Following Investigation, 2023 for Out of Court Disposals and The Sentencing Council, Types of Sentences for Children and Yount People for Court Orders.

just once, whilst others attended up to five times; the number of children attending each session ranged from three to eight participants. Throughout research stages, attendees were at various points in their youth justice involvement, were supported by the YJS for between one month and a year, and reflected diverse backgrounds and demographics. Children were aged between 14 and 18 years old, however most (14) were older children, between 16 and 18 years old; the majority were from ethnic minority backgrounds (Asian, Black and Mixed Heritage), 18 were boys and four were girls, and three were looked after children.[4]

PRG Recruitment and Procedure

Participants for the first three PRG sessions were recruited with the support of different pro-active youth justice practitioners, before changing to one dedicated youth practitioner, who took on the key contact role which improved consistent communication, planning and keeping practitioners and children onboard. The research associate (RA) remained in constant consultation with the key point of contact throughout the fieldwork regarding ongoing attendance and attrition (e.g., orders finishing, children disengaging or moving out of sample area), with suggested new participant names thus infilling any shortfalls. The host YJS undertook a risk assessment for the PRG sessions including potential risks and control measures. Issues addressed included: considering the PRG composition to ensure that the group worked well together (whilst still protecting diversity representation); using child-friendly venues (community and youth centres) booked by the key contact for each session; children pre-assessed for vulnerabilities and any additional needs (e.g., mental health issues, medication and learning difficulties); use of child acceptable behaviour agreements (including children not bringing any contraband to the sessions), negotiated through practitioners before attendance; identifying dietary requirements; YJS officers being involved throughout in order to support children (e.g., transport to and from the venue), but also to pick up on any reluctance on the part of the children, given that sometimes children find it difficult to express non-consent verbally and to someone they may not know (Hampson and Case, in press).

Researchers established the PRG as soon as they were able to recruit the host YJS, near the beginning of the project, enabling them to develop power-neutralising relationships (McGinnis and O'Shea, 2022) and understand how children perceive meaningful collaboration and 'effective' youth justice practice. In order to develop a close but safe environment for all participants, group ground rules were identified by the children in an initial activity which included: one person speaking at once, respect for difference and diversity, paying attention, and confidentiality in the group. These ground rules were reiterated (with visual back-up) at each PRG meeting, creating a sense of group ownership for respectful and empathic attitudes throughout. Initial sessions set the scene and explored creative activities for future sessions to ensure that the project was child-centric from the beginning. All meetings started with contextualisation, project information, feedback from previous sessions and ongoing consent to participate as a reminder to those children who had attended previously and as an introduction to new participants to support children's understandings of what the group was aiming to achieve.

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[4] All personal data are stored on GDPR compliant secure Microsoft Storage Cloud.

Sessions included icebreakers and team building activities/challenges to help create a relaxed environment, encourage children to share ideas, participate in group discussions, build rapport and have fun. Twelve PRG sessions (plus a recording studio session – see below) took place over an 18-month period to coincide with different stages of the research process. One-to-one breakout sessions (suggested by the children themselves) were used to elicit individual views and feedback, allowing children to speak more freely and not feel embarrassed or reluctant in front of their peers and facilitating contributions from quieter group members. Conversations were recorded (with their permission) and transcribed to ensure that all feedback, ideas and views were captured and able to influence each research stage with the research participant children sample and inform the learning process of best practice in facilitating a successful PRG. Domino's pizza, gift vouchers (£5), drinks and sweets were provided as an expression of appreciation to participants for giving up their time and sharing their valuable expertise, as well as enabling a more comfortable atmosphere for children to engage in co-researching pursuits.

The PRG integrated participatory methodologies across research stages, of co-producing interview foci, diary prompt-questions, developing and testing creative methods, data analysis and dissemination, maximising collaboration opportunities.

The PRG influenced:

- **Research questions** - *System Journey Interviews and diary prompts*, initially devised by the researchers, were evaluated and discussed with children for development into what they considered important. They gave advice on the phrasing (and formatting for diary prompts) of questions to be put to participant children. They also engaged with understandings around the terminology of 'participation' and 'collaboration' to ensure child-friendly language and explanations were utilised throughout to aid communication and understanding of the project terminology, aims and objectives.

- **Research instruments** – examples and ideas for data gathering tools (creative methodologies/materials/activities informed by initial enquiries as to what individual PRG members might like to use) were explored and developed to enable a more accessible and enjoyable experience for the child participant sample, through which they may be able to communicate more effectively rather than just using either conversation or the written word (which should remain as options, as they were actually identified as the preferred communication method for some).

- **Data Interpretation** – provision of child-appropriate informal training to help participants understand the basics of different analysis types and methods, with an emphasis on maintaining their natural voice, rather than creating them into adult-esque research analysts. The group looked at anonymised quotes and themes for child-centric interpretations. Continually checking back with the PRG has assisted researchers to ensure that the project remained child-focused and provided them with an opportunity to interpret findings for concurrence and challenge.

- **Dissemination** – children explored how they wanted to communicate the findings from the project, deciding on creating a rap using participant children's quotes and their own words, which was then recorded in a professional music studio. (Recording available on YouTube here: https://youtu.be/QLktwVt_BsY). Children were not involved in delivering Youth Justice System training, as their identity is sacrosanct for ethical reasons and practical issues of children being available to be involved in this activity. This was vital as a general protection for them [5].

The PRG approach distinguishes this project from others because of its embedded and consistent co-creation of research elements, which prioritises child-centric understandings and interpretations. This values children's knowledge and insights (previously undervalued – see Brierley, 2023), potentially rectifying this imbalance for future research projects. The PRG goes beyond recognising children's rights and acknowledging their expertise, as it involves providing creative child-friendly opportunities for undertaking meaningful participation and creating capacity for children to develop as co-researchers in partnership with adult academics. Use of a model like the PRG shows how child-centric understandings of research data need not stall at the analysis stage. Whilst a model involving children in the analysis of their own data allows for fully emancipated research, use of a proxy group instead ensures at least that child-centric viewpoints are fully represented within the findings and all research outputs.

Potential benefits for the PRG children

Whilst the PRG structure and procedure is unique to this project and differs from previous participatory research studies, there are many potential tangible benefits and positive impacts which are generalisable from these for the PRG children:

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[5] The PRG were not involved in the data gathering from the wider participant sample of children of this study due to potential safeguarding concerns for both cohorts of children and practical issues, which is why the actual data gathering was done by adult researchers.

- ✓ **Confidence-building** through seeing their ideas being valued (Caulfield and Sojka, 2023), nurturing social skills and generally helping children **to relax, feel calmer, safer and more optimistic** (Caulfield and Sojka, 2023)
- ✓ **Personal development**, fostering and expressing **individual creativity**, **improving self-esteem and social communication** (Barker and Homan, 2007); **negotiation, social, health and educational skills** (Porteous and Goodman, 2023)
- ✓ **Future prospects and a sense of achievement,** opportunities to gain experience, skills and qualifications for **careers** (Peer Power, 2021/2022) for inclusion in **CVs** and **job applications**
- ✓ Being **personally empowered to make a difference,** becoming **familiar with group and democratic processes,** acquiring and expanding children's **problem-solving skills,** developing an **awareness of, and value for, their own knowledge, understanding and insights, improved wellbeing and building positive relationships with adults and peers** (New South Wales Government, 2019)

Research Participant Children Processes

Sampling: Research Participant Children Sample (for data gathering)

The participant cohort incorporated a diverse range of participants, demographically and developmentally, thus maximising equality, diversity and inclusion, capturing the breadth and difference of Youth Justice System collaborative experiences.

Table 1: Sample Demographics, Characteristics and Stages of the Youth Justice System

	62 children were males, 3 were females and 1 self-identified as transgender male.
	Children's ages ranged from 12 to 18 years old, however the majority (32) were 17 years old and 9 were 18 years old.
	42 children were White British, 8 were from Mixed Heritage Backgrounds, 5 were Asian, 3 were Black British, 2 were Black Caribbean, 2 were Black African, 2 were White Eastern European, 1 was a White Irish Traveller and 1 was Italian.
	27 out of 66 children had identified developmental/neurodiversity/mental health issues including ADHD, depression, autism, dyslexia, Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), learning difficulties, cranial condition, speech and language development delays.
	There were 16 looked after children, 5 care leavers, 4 children on child protection measures, 3 identified as children in need.
	35 children were in custody (30 x YOI, 5 x SCH), 8 were on pre-court/prevention disposals, 21 were on Referral Orders and 2 were on Youth Conditional Orders.

Specific data were collected about participants, enabling a more in-depth investigation of any differences or distinctive findings. This study examined children's experience of all stages of the Youth Justice System, from pre-court, through community sentencing to custody settings. It included experiences and perceptions from 66 participants: 62 males, three females and one transgender male. The age range was extended to include children who were 18 years old (and over, but still within the purview of youth justice) to account for current practice and caseload changes on the ground, ensuring that the encounters of this cohort are reflected in this study. A recent Government policy (UK Government, 2022) to alleviate the capacity pressure in the adult estate due to overcrowding, has led to youth custody establishments keeping young people over the age of 18 years of age. This has resulted in the over-18-year-old *youth* custody population increasing from 49 to 150 (HM Prisons and Probation Service/Youth Custody Service, 2023). Furthermore, YJSs continue to support children turning 18 years of age in the community if their order is coming to an end or while they are transferring to Probation Service to support that transition.

It is widely acknowledged that children from ethnic minorities, those in the looked after children system, and children with neurodivergent and mental health conditions, are disproportionally represented in the youth justice population (see the Lammy Review, 2017 on experiences and outcomes for Black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the Youth Justice System; HMIP, 2021; Lord Laming, 2015; Day, 2021; see also Day, 2022 regarding neurodivergent children). Information about these characteristics was collected to ensure a diverse representation of children's experiences and the potential impact of these issues on their participation in decision-making on matters affecting them.

Participants reflected at least two of the demographics and/or system-stage and characteristics outlined above, covering all of them within the total sample; but as the research did not use statistical analysis (rather, prioritising children's voices), the sample was not matched in proportion by each characteristic involved in the Youth Justice System more widely. The recruitment relied on children agreeing to participate, thus the final sample was also a function of this, rather than demographic factors alone. There were no specific characteristics identified as a reason to exclude a child from participating on the grounds that this could potentially produce inequalities of voice.

Table 2: Purposive sample of participant children and number of interviews according to stage

No.	Setting	Location	1st Interview Sample No. (Face-to-Face)	Follow Up Interviews	2nd Interview Sample No. (face-to-face)	Total no. of Interviews
1	YJS	Wales	4	0	3	7
2	YJS	Northwest England	2	0	3	5
3	YJS	Yorkshire/ Humberside	10	0	9	19
4	YOI	West Yorkshire	8	2	5	15
5	YOI	Wales	10	5 (On-line)	7	22
6	SCH	Southwest England	5	2	0	7
Total No. of Interviews			**39**	**9**	**27**	**75**

Table 2 (above) presents the purposive sample for the participant children and the number of interviews. There were a total of 66 individual children and 75 interviews (including 9 follow up interviews with the same children) undertaken across six fieldwork sites: three YJS sites (two in England, one in Wales), two YOI sites (one in England, one in Wales) and one SCH (in England), with a total of 75 interviews undertaken.

Research Participant Children Recruitment and Procedure

The children in the participant sample (n= 66) were recruited with the assistance and knowledge of staff from each setting, taking advice on who to invite and utilising YJS/YOI/SCH officers to make introductions between the RA and potential participants. As with the PRG, relationship-building at the start of the project (and throughout) was vital with both the participant children and key contact staff and practitioners, for developing constructive, sustainable, power-neutral engagement. System journey interviews (see below for discussion on these) were conducted in two phases over a twelve-month period. Initially, the project aimed to repeat these system journey interviews with the same cohort of children, however, it became clear that this would not be possible due to children's orders ending, transferring to the Probation Service, custodial sentences ending, resettlement/moving address to a YJS not in the fieldwork sample, and disengagement. The first phase of interviews was conducted with 39 children (16 x YJS; 23 custody), the second phase comprised 27 interviews with different children (15 x YJS; 12 x custody), which included 9 follow-up interviews (in custodial settings, with 5 of those conducted online).

A total of seven children exercised their right to withdraw from this study: three during YJS visits, one child changed his mind about being interviewed, another child (with communication difficulties/ADHD) started to feel anxious when the interview commenced and decided he didn't want to continue and one parent withdrew her child as she was unable to provide transport to the venue due to illness. Four children in custodial settings

also withdrew, one child had agreed to participate but was then called for a court hearing, one child was asleep and staff did not want to wake her as she had had a 'bad' night, and two boys at the SCH refused to participate in interviews on a second visit: one said he "couldn't be bothered" and the other child was feeling low because he was missing his family and changed his mind on the day of the visit.

The system journey interviews were enhanced by using creative approaches including: 'Would You Rather/Have you Ever' questions (as icebreakers), Lego building and Playdough sculpture activities, squeezy stress balls, circle cards and coloured pens (for writing rap lyrics), which had all be trialled and developed with the PRG. After each fieldwork visit, the RA sent a child-friendly one-page overview of research findings to the key contact to be shared with participants (and staff) to keep them informed of and engaged with the project.

Data collection methods for participant cohort children

Data gathering tools for this qualitative study provided a unique window into children's lived experience and included system journey interviews and digital/paper diaries. Data gathering took place during a thirteen-month fieldwork window.

System Journey Interviews

The system journey interviews were designed to collect data in relation to the research questions utilising their experiences across and through different stages of the Youth Justice System, focusing on collaboration understandings, objectives, their perceptions of *effective* collaboration practice, and their ideas for such practice development. The interviews were face-to-face, enabling more meaningful data collection which could benefit from rapport-building and observance of paralinguistic cues (Shapka et al., 2016) to facilitate a greater ability for children to communicate their true thoughts/feelings/ experiences without fear of reprisal

through the requirement of having staff present. The use of activity-oriented interviews (using creative activities and methods to supplement questions) supported researchers in a range of settings who needed to elicit the views and perspectives of those who may have difficulty engaging with typical interview formats (Winstone et al., 2014). Virtual/online interviews (supported by the key contacts but minimising the impact of staff presence as far as possible) were also offered to children for keeping in touch in-between face-to-face visits.

An interview schedule (co-developed with the PRG) was used as a guide for prompting data collection linked to the original research questions to ensure reliability and consistency, whilst permitting flexibility. The system journey interviews took the form of a semi-structured 'conversation with a purpose' to help the interaction flow, listening carefully to what children were saying in order to respond appropriately but also ensuring relevant issues and topics were being included (Burgess, 1984, p. 102). All interviews were digitally audio

recorded and then transcribed, with the original audio files being deleted as soon as possible, leaving only anonymised transcribed interviews.

Digital Diaries

'Digital diaries' were offered to children as a way to communicate their experiences throughout the data gathering period (either written/voice/video/photo/artwork) via laptops (one per YJS site) without necessarily needing adult (or researcher) facilitation. Questions were provided on the laptop home screen as a prompt (based on the RQs), where needed, and children could make as many entries as they wished, giving them an element of control (but aiming for at least monthly). Whilst using diaries as a method for collecting qualitative data is not new in social research, taking advantage of new technologies for capturing contemporary lived experiences of children in the Youth Justice System remains unexplored. Digital diaries can be helpful for a record of events, reactions and exploration of experience (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). They enable participants to utilise potentially familiar technology whilst integrating other creative ways of expression, befitting their interests and strengths/capabilities. Additionally, Jarrahi et al. (2021, p. 5) noted that using digital diaries affords richness of data through multimedia/multisensory data collection and immediacy/convenience of recording data and editorial power, as participants can re-record responses. Conversely, they cautioned that using diaries for data gathering can be 'challenging and involve a significant element of unpredictability' (p. 12); therefore commitment, flexibility and encouragement is required to engage children in this innovative method.

Laptops

Both Apple iPads and laptops were discussed in consultation with IT experts, reviewing which solution would work best to meet the project requirements of capturing digital diaries. Laptops were recommended as being the most appropriate device for allowing multiple accounts, security features and usability, with researchers acting as system administrators to set up secure individual child accounts. To enable wider access and encourage creativity, laptops had the facility of touchscreen and a digital pen, and the following Apps were downloaded and installed: *Voice Recorder, Camera/Video, 3D builder, Whiteboard, 3D Paint, WordPad, Sticky Notes* (for recording voice-notes, self-composed raps, photos of artwork/activities, art and design). 'Wallpaper' prompt questions linked to the research questions (reviewed by the PRG for clarity and understanding) were used as the front screen setting for children to use if necessary.

Laptops were delivered to key link staff at each YJSs (to be shared between participant children) when the RA conducted initial visits. During the interview sessions, the RA spoke to children about completing digital diaries for the project in between interviews, however in some cases this was not appropriate due to individual circumstances and practicalities (e.g., lack of focused engagement and rapport, communication issues, location, involvement with YJS ending). The RA discussed and agreed the details with each fieldwork setting key link person, of how children could be supported to use the laptops during their work with children, to

gather youth justice experiences and reflections on collaborative practice throughout the fieldwork timeframe. A practitioner laptop guide was developed and shared to support this activity.

Paper diaries and alternative data collection in custodial settings

The RA discussed alternative methods with the secure estate key link staff at the beginning of the project and continually throughout the fieldwork phase to overcome barriers of obtaining/using laptop digital diaries within custody. The RA was also in direct contact with the lead IT manager at one YOI to try to overcome challenges, including trying to utilise in-house equipment. Advice was sought from the Special Advisory Group (further details below) custody representatives who stated that IT issues and access were addressed at a local establishment level, with permissions granted individually. Despite being informed by the Youth Custody Service (YCS) that the secure estate had rolled out laptops in children's rooms, this differed to responses on the ground. Once all avenues had been explored, it became evident the digital diary method would not be possible mainly due to on-going limited IT access (roll out happening during/after fieldwork), restrictions on laptop configuration and network system security issues. In order to overcome this challenge, more traditional paper diaries options were discussed, with key link staff, to provide children with the opportunity to share their experiences, using folders (posted to the secure estate settings) to collect information/work examples and using direct email services to communicate with children.

Digital/Paper Diary Challenges

The RA kept in contact with key link staff at all fieldwork sites throughout the project and followed up on diary entry activity, however, it became apparent as the project progressed difficulties of using this method were arising and none of the sites had managed to engage with children to use them. Feedback was sought from the fieldwork sites to understand the barriers which were mainly related to operational issues including lack of practitioner confidence with the creative Apps or 'buy-in' to use this new type of activity, it was seen as an additional/duplication of tasks and difficult to incorporate with short term orders and not offered to children. Other issues reported were the logistics of sharing one laptop across difference area teams and children and staff unaware of the initiative. One custodial site reported that children were not interested in completing the paper diary option. More positively some fieldwork sites did share some of the children's work, including art projects, lyrics and examples of their input into the service business plan.

On reflection, the researchers realised that this method had been developed initially with minimal PRG collaboration, mainly due to the competing timescales of setting up the PRG and having to order and configure the laptops so they were ready to be delivered to fieldwork sites. To gain a more in-depth understanding of why this method was unsuccessful, the researchers consulted with the PRG about the digital diary concept. Interestingly, they fed back that they would have engaged with making diary entries as part of their YJS contacts/reparation, and would have preferred to do this on a laptop (as their phones had too many distractions); they liked the choice of creative apps (meeting different interests and ways to communicate), however would need to be reminded by their worker to complete entries. One of the reasons they thought

children may not have made entries was because "they just couldn't be bothered to do it". The researchers suggested adopting the diary/telegraph 'room' concept from such TV programmes as 'Big Brother' and 'I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here'. Whilst some children liked these ideas, one child said, "I don't think I'd be up for talking about stuff, like me saying something to the camera. I'm alright with speaking but when it's in front of a camera, I don't really know, I could never be a YouTuber". The feedback from the PRG members suggested that the digital diary concept may be a method to develop and utilise in future projects, but that youth justice practitioners would need additional support and training to use the technology, with a more positive message conveyed to children to support their engagement.

Special Advisory Group

A Special Advisory Group (SAG) was established at the beginning of the project with group membership comprising a range of key youth justice practice professionals and academics, including representatives from YJSs and custodial settings and researchers with specific knowledge and expertise in the project methodology. An initial SAG meeting was convened online during the early stages of the project, agreeing the group's role, terms of reference and project timetable. Thereafter, individual members were contacted throughout the project for specific advice and guidance relating to their expertise. All members were sent update reports at key decision-making points across the life of the project, with adequate time allocated for stakeholders to review and comment on drafts, plans and progress. The SAG provided oversight, advice, and challenge on the conduct of the research, including the methods and approaches used for the project, provided feedback on the suitability and quality of research instruments designed and used for the participatory methods. They were given the opportunity to help shape and advise on communication and dissemination of project outputs and findings. A draft final report was shared with the SAG for comment, to quality assure contents and help identify implications and recommendations for policy and practice.

Ethical Considerations

This participatory research project raised a number of ethical issues that warranted careful consideration at all stages of the research process (research design, consent issues, access to sample children and data collection/storage, analysis and anonymity in reports and dissemination). Specific considerations arise when conducting research with children and when researching sensitive topics (Shaw et al., 2011), so relevant ethical guidelines have informed our work including:

- British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics (2006)
- British Sociological Association's stated aims of good practice (2004)
- Socio-Legal Studies Association Principles of Ethical Research Practice (2009)

In order to address the specific ethical issues arising from this project, a risk register was developed by the research team who have consulted with stakeholder groups throughout (e.g. SAG, PRG, YJSs and secure estate sites) on research design and ethical considerations, and measures were put in place to ensure that all activities were properly managed, holding the safeguarding of children as the highest priority and avoiding any re-traumatisation of child participants.

The research proposal (including research methods, participant information sheets and consent/assent forms) have been scrutinised, revised and approved by:

- Loughborough University Ethics Sub-Committee (Aberystwyth University accepted Loughborough's approval) and

- HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Governance Board (for secure estate access)

The researchers (Co-Investigator and Research Associate) who undertook the fieldwork completed enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks to allow for one-to-one and group working with vulnerable children. This permitted the researchers to speak to participants without any practitioners or support officers being present, enabling a more open dialogue with children for expressing their views candidly about their experiences without fear of reprisal. Moreover, researchers were fully cognisant of the latest statutory safeguarding guidance (UK Government, 2023), and familiarised themselves with local protocols at the various fieldwork sites.

Project information was adapted to ensure that it was accessible and age-appropriate, accounting for literacy levels, communication needs and cognitive functioning. Information included research aims, methods and dissemination (including confidentiality and anonymity issues), participation activities and potential risks and benefits. Informed consent (and assent for children under 16, who are unable to give legally-valid consent) was sought from institutional gatekeepers, parents/guardians and children themselves. Participants (children and agencies) were informed, and reminded, of their right to withdraw at any stage (including post-data gathering). Consent protocols were established, setting parameters for data collection/recording which included permission for transcription and quoting of anonymised data. All data and personal information were held in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), including ensuring the accuracy of data, and use being for the explicitly stated purpose only and stored securely.

All data outputs were anonymised at the earliest point, with identities separated from data (creating anonymised datasets) and the deletion of non-anonymised data (e.g., interview recordings after transcription). Therefore, anonymisation was employed to allow data to be shared (including making it accessible for future research), whilst preserving privacy.

Data Analysis

All interviews were fully transcribed by the RA, which required 'active listening' to facilitate a 'deeper immersion into the data' (Bryne, 2022, p. 1398), which had the added advantage of developing familiarisation earlier on in the analysis process. Data transcription was enhanced with contextual information, such as interview location, significant information about the participant (e.g., quiet, difficult to engage, talkative), creative activities chosen by participants, and noting nuances like pauses and laughter in conversations. Many recordings had to be listened to several times to ensure good quality transcription and accuracy, taking into account background noise, accents, mumbling and current teenage slang (use of words/phases unfamiliar to adult researcher!) During transcription, initial data trends started to emerge which later became the building-blocks for developing initial codes, before then being developed into themes in subsequent interpretations of the data.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

The two datasets (participant children interviewed from *YJSs* and *custody*) were analysed together using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clark, 2022). This gave a clear picture of the similarities and differences between the two samples and enabled themes to develop that cut across the whole dataset as well as those that were more nuanced to specific settings.

Initial themes and sub-themes generated from the coding process were reviewed, compared continuously back to the data and categorised throughout the fieldwork and analysis stages to allow for more focused themes to be formulated relating to the most frequent and significant points being made by the participants. Quotes representing these were put before the PRG for their interpretation and consideration. The RA returned to the data multiple times to recode and reconsider themes during the RTA process. There were many tentative theme iterations during the analysis stages where different facets were explored that encapsulated the richness and depth of the dataset, engaging, questioning, refining and developing the analysis further.

The final themes did not capture the whole dataset (other interesting topics discussed had to be discarded for this process because they were not directly relevant to the research questions), but choices made reflected a coherent analysis of the data and the scope of the final report output. Eventually, the researchers agreed on the main themes and sub-themes most pertinent to the research questions, which were again shared with the PRG for validation.

Nvivo/Coding

A coding framework was drawn up based on the interview schedule, but which allowed flexibility for inductive themes to emerge from the data content, demonstrating the reflexive process researchers undertook. Nvivo

(a qualitative computer software package) was used to assist with the coding strategy due to the large quantity of data generated from the interviews. This also assisted with data management, organisation, storage and handling.

Summary of Findings

Introduction

This section of the report presents an analysis of data obtained from the fieldwork stage of the project, providing a rich description and interpretation of findings both from the Project Reference Group (PRG) sessions and interviews undertaken with participant children in the research sites. It details their interactions with youth justice agencies, looking at patterns across the dataset in relation to the research questions, which are:

1. **Collaboration understandings:** How do children perceive and understand their collaboration in the decision-making processes that underpin responses to their offending across the Youth Justice System?

2. **Collaboration objectives**: What do children believe should be the objectives of their collaboration in decision-making processes? Do these perceived objectives differ to those held by adult professionals – if so, how and why?

3. **Collaboration Effectiveness:** How do children perceive and experience 'effective' collaboration, such as the effectiveness of processes and how collaboration outcomes should be measured?

4. **Practice development**: What is the extent and nature of 'Child First' collaboration practice and decision-making processes across youth justice agencies and, based on children's experience, and how could these be improved?

Each research question (RQ) is discussed in a separate section, commencing with an 'information box' presenting the work that researchers undertook with the PRG exploring the RQ concept, which helped to inform the methodology employed in the research sites. Findings from the interviews with the participant sample children from both YJSs and custodial settings (two Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) and one Secure Children's Home (SCH) are then presented, starting with a summary table of the main themes and subthemes followed by in-depth analysis of each. Whilst the inductive approach and utilising children's voices as evidence was paramount during interpretation, theory has good explanatory power and was drawn upon to guide the analysis of the dataset. At the end, a brief conclusion summarises the main points, highlighting the importance of the findings and how they relate to the each RQ from children's perspectives. Note that more in-depth discussions of the implications of these findings are developed in a subsequent report section.

RQ1: Collaboration Understandings

RQ1 aimed to extend knowledge of how children perceived and understood collaboration in the decision-making processes that underpin responses to their offending across the Youth Justice System. A summary of the discussions with the PRG is presented, before sharing the findings from the participant sample.

Summary of PRG discussions about 'Collaboration Understanding': Child-friendly Language and Communication to aid Understanding

PRG sessions (see Methodology section) were used to develop child-friendly, child appropriate ways of communicating with children about the research concepts and questions, as well as sharing research findings from the participant sample, which provided an opportunity for children to discuss and validate emerging themes and sub-themes.

'Collaboration' was not a word that children used or were familiar with, which caused some confusion concerning its ambiguous meaning. In order to understand this, researchers explored its meaning during PRG sessions. Children gave their views about the meaning and processes of active 'participation' and 'collaboration' and stressed that **providing clear information in child-friendly formats and consulting with them should be the "bare minimum".** Some felt that their interactions with professionals were directive, "tokenistic", "just for show" and "just to make the adult look good"; they were often told what to do instead of being asked for their views, or their contributions were ignored. They were adamant that **they should be spoken to first and listened to before any decisions were made about them**, instead of professionals simply reading information about them from reports and paperwork.

Terms such as **"communication", "consultation", "information", "involvement" and "have their say and be listened to"** were used by the PRG children to express their understanding of the concept of 'collaboration'. Children said that researchers needed to use **"simple language"**, ensure that **questions were focused and "not too long"** so that children were able to follow what was being asked, **try explaining questions in different ways and be flexible to address children's different levels of understanding**. In terms of conducting the participant interviews, children thought it was a good idea for the **Research Associate (RA) to be friendly, get to know participants a little bit at the beginning of the interview, ask about their interests and keep eye contact as a show of respect.**

This feedback prompted the RA to tailor interviews more specifically to individuals and be more aware of using appropriate child-friendly language to aid clearer communication and understanding of the research questions. For example, the RA was able to use the terminology that the PRG children used when interviewing participants; they were asked about communication, if they were able to have a say in what they did and during decision-making both with YJSs and in custodial settings, whether professionals consulted with them, and if they felt listened to.

Exploring Collaboration Understandings with Participant Children

Table 3 below summarises the main theme and sub-themes which were developed from the analysis of the data exploring collaboration understandings.

Four main themes emerged relating to children's understanding of collaboration from their experience of encounters with different agencies and stages of the Youth Justice System, which suggested a sequence of four stages: ask children for their opinions, listen to children, respect children's views (and respond appropriately), and keep children informed. These themes are presented and interpreted below, providing examples selected concerning a range of agencies to highlight that they were commonplace across the whole of the Youth Justice System, illustrating and supporting the points being made. The main agencies that children spoke about being involved with were **YJSs, custody (YOI and SCH), the police, courts, Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and children's social care services.** Children were asked how they were involved when decisions were being made about them and how they were able to contribute to what happened to them when they were interacting and working with the different youth justice services.

Table 3: Collaboration Understandings – identified themes

Themes
1. Ask children for their opinions
2. Listen to children
3. Respect Children's Views
4. Keep children informed

1. Ask children for their opinions

A central theme expressed in interviews about children's understanding of collaboration was the importance of asking children their opinions – valuing being asked for their views, the ability to express their opinions openly, and being listened to by professionals. Children recognised the importance of effective two-way communication to enable professionals to better understand what they think about their circumstances, discuss the support needed and what they want to happen during their involvement with youth justice agencies. Being encouraged to engage in respectful conversations, being spoken to appropriately and having their views considered were essential elements of collaboration from children's perspectives. Asking children for their opinion was a consistent thread present throughout responses to all of the RQs.

2. Listen to children

When children spoke about the youth justice agencies with which they were involved, being listened to was the key component of collaboration in their opinion. They felt that both sides (children and adults) should be able to discuss issues straightforwardly and listen to each other's point of view to enable shared decisions about what should happen to them. This reciprocity interlinks with the 'developing effective interventions and support together' theme discussed later in this section in response to the question about 'Effective Collaboration', and is demonstrated by the following quote, about a YJS practitioner:

> He listens to me, he wants to find out what I think about things, he doesn't cut me off when I'm speaking (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

The theme of being listened to featured prominently in interviews undertaken in custodial settings and it was evident that children's views were taken into account more in one of the YOIs than the other, or in the SCH visited. Being spoken to "normally" and listened-to provided the basis for positive communication between children and adults:

> They [case manager] listen if we got something we want to say. That's what it's like. It doesn't feel like we're ordered about all the time, they just speak to us like normal. (Boy, Age 17, YOI2)

Children were frequently critical of not being listened to by police officers, judges and court officers, secure estate staff and social workers, expressing how this hampered collaboration and their ability to influence decisions being made about them. Children's understanding of collaboration and *not* being fully involved in matters affecting them was most noticeable when discussing contact with the police, with most stating that their opinions were hardly ever sought and much less considered. The next quote sums up how many participant children perceived conversations with the police to be judgemental and coloured by preconceived ideas about them, with their views disregarded, making no difference to what then happened. Additionally, the child clearly perceived himself to be labelled as a criminal, an issue likely to impact negatively on the way police communicate with children, respond to them and make decisions which affect them.

> They [police] were asking me stuff, but I think they'd already made up their minds about what would happen, they weren't really listening and taking any notice, they ask cos they have to but then don't do owt it's just so they look like they're doing things right, but it's not gonna make any difference to the outcome. They were treating me like I were a criminal and not giving me a chance; they're just assuming stuff all the time. (Girl, Age 16, YJS2)

3. Respect children's views

Children wanted adults to acknowledge what they were saying, respect their opinions and have them take into account, when speaking with professionals. They spoke positively about their experiences with YJSs, with most children stating that their views were valued when discussing matters affecting them and that they felt

able to contribute to the decision-making process. In the following excerpt, the child recounted a conversation with his youth justice practitioner, illustrating his involvement in a reciprocal discussion with both parties actively participating:

> He [youth justice practitioner] listens and he's reasonable ... he respects my views really well ... I'll say my opinion and he'll say his opinion and we'll talk about it, no argument. We'll just talk about what's happening to me and move on from there. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

Conversely, the following example focused on the police and how they should prioritise respectful two-way communication as if they were talking with their own children, and therefore listen to what is being said:

> If you're going to arrest me yeah, talk to me with respect ... like the way they speak to their own kids. Don't speak down to us and listen, speak to us on the level and we'll listen too. (Boy, Age 16, YJS3)

> *If you're going to arrest me yeah, talk to me with respect ... like the way they speak to their own kids. Don't speak down to us and listen, speak to us on the level and we'll listen too. (Boy, Age 16, YJS3)*

For children's views to be respected and valued, their opinions needed to make a difference to decisions on what happens during their involvement with the various agencies of the Youth Justice System, when discussing how collaboration works from their perspective. Children felt that they should be involved in conversations with professionals who were genuinely interested in their views, they were supported to express themselves freely about issues of importance to them, be heard, and able to understand the subsequent influence on decisions about what happened to them. This is illustrated through a child supported by a YJS, who spoke about how different his experience was from what he expected and how conversations made a difference and led to joint-decision-making:

> My worker is really nice, he listens to me... he lets me talk and we can discuss things together and then decide what needs to happen. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

4. Keep children informed

Children felt that they should be kept fully informed about issues affecting them, including being given clear information, child-friendly language and two-way communication. The following extract is from a child being supported by a YJS explaining how his experience was more positive than he anticipated, with good communication and clear information assisting joint decision-making.

> I thought it was going to be more of a punishment, but it's not like that at all, it's a way to help and they do that by getting to know what you think about stuff and what you want to do ... It's not like they tell you; we decide stuff together. The information they've given me is clear, they talk to me in a way I can understand and I can ask stuff if I'm not sure about it. (Boy, Age 17, YJS2)

In contrast, children frequently recounted their experiences of being kept in police cells for lengthy periods of time, often criticising the lack of information provided about what was happening. In the following extract a child spoke about his "rough" and "confusing" time of being kept in a police cell and concluding:

> The worst thing was the lack of communication, no one telling me what was going on. (Boy, Age 18, YOI2)

Children in both participating YOIs spoke about formal feedback forums/councils in operation. In the SCH, a commissioned external children's rights organisation visited on a weekly basis. It was felt that these mechanisms could be useful for providing opportunities for communication and information; however, views were mixed on how effective they were in practice. Some children were unaware of their existence while others expressed room for improvement; for example, ensuring that arrangements were inclusive of children housed on all wings (not just those on an enhanced regime level due to good behaviour), that they took place consistently, and provided clear information about what action had been taken forwards from the feedback.

Some children said that feedback forums/councils were a positive way for children to give their input into a range of issues affecting them and a good approach to being involved in decision-making about "what they could do to make things better". Some children said that if a change was not possible, a feedback loop and explanation was sometimes provided; however, in other cases children just felt that "nothing gets done". Inconsistencies in feedback processes were expressed by children, but others were positive about their involvement, saying that they felt they were *sometimes* listened to or given explanations when something could not be done, as the following child explains:

> I give feedback quite often... So they do listen here every now and again, but not always, but it's jail innit... if you can't have something they just say, look I'm ever so sorry, but mainly you get stuff or they give you reasons why. (Boy, Age 18, YOI1)

RQ1 Conclusion: How do children perceive and understand their collaboration in the decision-making processes that underpin responses to their offending across the Youth Justice System?

The overarching theme and sub-themes of Collaboration Understanding have been developed from children's interview responses about their understanding of collaboration, which mainly concurred with what children from the PRG thought. Unanimously, seeking children's opinions, being listened to, having their views valued, and acting on what children have said, encapsulates how children perceived and understood their collaboration in decision-making processes. Children criticised youth justice agencies for not listening to them, where consultation was limited or when their views seemed to be ignored. Many children identified barriers to having their voice heard, for example, not being listened to, police officers being disrespectful and a lack of information being provided about what was happening, negating their ability to influence decisions about matters affecting them. Children wanted to receive clear information about youth justice processes, feedback forums/councils to be more inclusive, and for feedback loops to be better incorporated into practice so that

they understood what was happening by being kept fully informed about actions taken as a result of collaboration.

RQ2: Collaboration Objectives

The second RQ investigated what children thought collaboration practices were aiming to achieve, *should* be aiming to achieve, what the perceived advantages of collaboration in decision-making processes were, and whether these perceptions differed from those of the adult professionals involved. A summary of the discussions with the PRG around RQ2 is presented before going onto share findings from the participant children.

Summary of PRG discussions about 'Collaboration Objectives': **The objective of collaboration was to work together with youth justice professionals, identifying their goals and what was important to them, complete their order and get on with their lives.**

Children gave their views on what 'collaboration objectives' meant to them, understanding it to mean a **'target of working together'**, resulting in them being more likely to participate in work and activities if they were asked about what they wanted to do as part of their youth justice contact. Although children were asked by youth justice practitioners about what they wanted to do as part of their plan, some said they could not remember or were vague about the interventions they undertook and said that they just "chatted" to their youth justice worker during contact appointments, and were unclear what the point was. When discussing 'collaboration objectives' with children, the conversation often morphed to encompass 'effectiveness' highlighting the interconnectivity between the two questions.

Children thought that the objective of collaboration meant **they could talk about what was important to them.** In the majority of cases this was linked to college and getting a job so they could be **"moving on"**, and some said it was good to be able to discuss issues that were important to them with youth justice professionals, **welcoming the opportunity to be involved in deciding what they were going to be doing while they were involved with the YJS**. Getting a job and earning money were crucial to children; they said that if they could not get a job they would start thinking of other ways to get money, which sometimes led them towards being involved in illegal activities. Some children were often undecided on what they wanted to do in the future and felt that their options were either unrealistic or opportunities were limited and were "held back" because of their criminal record; **so they welcomed the support from the YJS**. Collaboration objectives seemed to steer children towards thinking about **having a goal** in life, which helped them to stay focused and deterred them from further offending. Children felt that the objective of collaboration with youth justice professionals was to be able to explore what they needed to do so they could **"just get through it"** (their youth justice order) so **they were able to get on with their life**. They discussed having **"a plan for what I want to do with my life"** as being important to them and that it would be **helpful if youth justice practitioners prioritised *the child's own* objectives by assisting them to explore their options.**

Co-working with the PRG helped the RA when interviewing participant children, using the topics the children had raised to open up conversations and exploring whether this was similar or different to their own experiences in both custodial and YJS settings.

Exploring Collaboration Objectives with Participant Children

Table 4 summarises the main themes and sub-themes that have been generated from the analysis of research findings that were concerned with Collaboration Objectives. One main theme (with three contributory sub-themes) was developed from the dataset relating to collaboration objectives from children's experience of encounters within different agencies and stages of the Youth Justice System: prioritise children's life goals (ask children what they want to achieve in life, hear and support children's stated aspirations and help children to look forward and get on with their lives). The overarching theme and sub-themes are presented and interpreted below, providing quotes to illustrate the points being made. Children were asked what the aim of collaboration was and what difference it should make about what happens to them.

Table 4: Collaboration Objectives – identified theme and sub-themes

Theme 1
Prioritise children's own life goals
Sub-themes
i.   Ask children what they want to achieve in life ii. Hear and support children's stated aspirations iii. Help children to look forward and get on with their lives

1. **Prioritise children's own life goals**

A frequent theme expressed by children being interviewed about the objective of collaboration was linked to what they specifically wanted to do with their life, rather than being offered a list of prescribed adult-centric interventions and activities. Children thought it was important that they were asked about what plans and life goals they may have and often acknowledged that they needed support and encouragement to accomplish these ambitions. Some of the children recognised that youth justice professionals could support them to explore possibilities and help them to achieve their plans so they could move forward with their life. Furthermore youth justice agencies could facilitate participation in activities that children enjoyed, enabling them to develop skills and interests that would build towards positive change and outcomes.

i.   Ask children what they want to achieve in life

Children said that youth justice agencies should always ask them what they wanted to do to whilst working with the YJS or during their custodial sentence. Children did speak about having plans, however they did not mean youth justice community interventions or custody sentence plans, but planning for what they wanted to do with their life generally, which mainly centred around education and employment and "not getting into any more trouble". Consequently they were often vague and unable to remember what activities had been set as part of their involvement with youth justice agencies. The following quote from an interview with a child

being supported by the YJS illustrates the importance children placed on being asked their opinion when developing plans and that they should be forward-looking.

> They asked me what I wanted to do to 'make it right' so I can get on with my life. (Boy, Age 17, YJS2)

The following quote demonstrates that a child being asked what support they needed from the YJS during intervention planning processes led to them becoming more confident; this ties into the question about 'collaboration effectiveness' (discussed later) as it demonstrates a positive outcome:

> They asked me what sorts of things I wanted to do and I did some work about peer pressure and positive relationships, friendships – what makes a good friend … I can talk more confidently. (Boy, Age 15, YJS2)

> *They asked me what sorts of things I wanted to do and I did some work about peer pressure and positive relationships, friendships – what makes a good friend … I can talk more confidently. (Boy, Age 15, YJS2)*

Children's responses in custody were mixed – they were uncertain about planning activities and the extent to which they were actively involved in decision-making about what they wanted to achieve whilst incarcerated and/or as part of resettlement after release. Some could not remember being asked for their input, whilst others said the institution's main focus was on behaviour, incentives and daily regimes. Nevertheless some children in custody thought that collaboration should facilitate their future plans, ensuring that time was spent wisely to achieve life goals. As one child explained, he saw his time in custody as a constructive opportunity to work towards GCSE qualifications to improve his employment prospects after release:

> I have a plan in my head, I want to get as many qualifications as possible, get everything done and as much work experience as possible … passing my GCSEs and getting my qualifications, maybe one day I'll have a job. I want to be a labourer, anything hands on I'll do, I like being outside. (Boy, Age 16, SCH)

ii.   *Having aspirations heard and supported*

Having aspirations heard and supported through collaboration with youth justice organisations and professionals was an important driver of achievement and successful outcomes for an offence free and constructive future for justice-involved children. For the majority of children who were interviewed, their aspirations included largely conventional hopes for the future, like having a life plan, being in a suitable education provision for their career aims, completing their youth justice order and not reoffending; these were important objectives for building independence and achieving their life goals.

Children expressed how their involvement with the YJS had been a positive experience, as professionals had listened to what support they needed and helped them to achieve their career aspirations. One girl seemed fully aware of how YJSs should work with children, stating that work should be child-centric and linked to children's interests and their own expressed future goals. She explained that she engaged with the YJS because she participated in activities she enjoyed. This example interlinks with 'collaborative effectiveness' (discussed later), highlighting a successful positive outcome for the child *because* she was listened to and supported by the YJS to achieve *her* career aspiration to be a social worker:

> *It should be based around the child, so like for me Health and Social Care is my goal, so they organised for me to be on the interview panel for social workers. All the stuff I want to do in the future …* *(Girl, Age 17, YJS2)*

It should be based around the child, so like for me Health and Social Care is my goal, so they organised for me to be on the interview panel for social workers. All the stuff I want to do in the future which made me then want to engage in it because I enjoy it. (Girl, Age 17, YJS2)

Another child shared an example of being listened to, encouraged to pursue positive pursuits to build competencies and skills, enhance individual development and provided with real opportunities for change, benefiting his future career prospects. A youth justice practitioner had asked the child what he was interested in and subsequently helped him to access a motorbike activity which provided a safe environment for him to develop, enabled him to explore career opportunities, thereby supporting desistance from further offending:

> I said I was interested in motorbikes … [youth justice worker] took me to a motorbike place, where you can ride motorbikes … and now I just want to help innit, teach kids how to ride … and my [youth justice worker] is helping me to do that … I'd like to maybe get a job doing something like it … it's been positive … I wanna just stay out of trouble and this helps. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

Children recognised that youth justice professionals could help them with their plans and reported that their workers were influential in supporting positive change. In the following extract a child explained how staff at the YJS had supported him with confidence-building and to make the changes needed to achieve his own goals - to stop offending and turn his life around:

> I realised I need to change my life around, I'm 18 soon, it's not worth it, if I get into trouble again it'll be big boy jail … if it wasn't for these guys here [at the YJS] I'd still be going down that path now, [youth justice practitioner] has really helped me turn my life around with their help and stuff they're doing. They've put a lot of confidence back in myself. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

iii.   *Help children to look forward and get on with their lives*

One of the main objectives of collaboration in decision-making expressed by children was completing their order "quickly" and to "get on with the rest of my life"; to achieve this, youth justice professionals needed to *ask* them about their life goals and then support them to achieve them. This sub-theme is interconnected with the previous two regarding the objectives of collaboration. Children wanted to be asked about their aspirations and offered the right support to achieve them, but ultimately they wanted to move forward with their life. The following quote shows one child's opinion about the objective of his discussions with his youth justice worker and involvement with the YJS:

> A job that I like and can earn good money. Not get into any more trouble ... I just want to get it over and done with as quick as possible and get on with the rest of my life. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

Another child being supported by the YJS expressed his appreciation that he had been involved in all aspects of his intervention and the way the YJS had accomplished this:

> It's child friendly and so far it's been a positive experience and they've included me in what's happening all the time, I don't want to go back to offending and that, I want to go forward now in life. (Boy, Age 17, YJS2)

It's child friendly and so far it's been a positive experience and they've included me in what's happening all the time, I don't want to go back to offending and that, I want to go forward now in life. (Boy, Age 17, YJS2)

RQ2 Conclusion: What do children believe should be the objectives of their collaboration in decision-making processes? Do these perceived objectives differ to those held by adult professionals – if so, how and why?

Children felt that the main objective of collaboration with youth justice organisations and professionals was to develop a plan to support them to achieve their own self-expressed life goals, which usually focused on accessing appropriate education provision or securing a job with decent wages which kept them focused and deterred them from further offending. Children made the distinction between having their life plan and youth justice intervention/custody plans, indicating that the former was most important to them as they were often unclear about tasks on the latter. Consequently, youth justice agencies need to ensure that formal intervention and custody plans prioritise children's expressed priorities and goals rather than their own preconceived ideas and programmes. This could prove challenging when children have court-ordered requirements, but emphasises the need for *all* agencies of youth justice (including the courts) to have a clear understanding of how vital collaboration in any kind of planning is for successful outcomes. Children recognised that youth justice professionals could be helpful if they worked together, therefore asking children

about their aspirations and linking interventions and activities directly to them is both practical and supportive of them moving forward in their lives.

RQ3: Collaboration Effectiveness

This question aimed to ascertain how children perceive and experience 'effective' practice in collaboration, such as the effectiveness of youth justice processes and how outcomes should be measured. A summary of the RQ3-related discussions with the PRG is presented, before providing an overview of findings from the research with the participant children.

Summary of PRG Discussions about 'Collaboration Effectiveness': Building Trusting Relationships, Counteracting Power Dynamics, Choice and Effective Practice

Youth justice intervention plans, what work children undertook as part of their order, how they were involved in decision-making affecting them and what they thought was successful, were all discussed at PRG sessions to obtain children's views on 'collaboration effectiveness'. Children said they **mostly contributed to decisions about the work they did with YJSs and that youth justice practitioners were flexible with arranging contact appointments**. Sometimes agreed tasks did not happen or it took too long and children had completed their order before receiving the support they needed, for example, finding suitable housing, appropriate college placements or work.

Children spoke about "**trust**" , of finding it difficult to "open up" and talk about their feelings, of being guarded with their youth justice worker no matter how long they had known them**, seeing them as authority figures**. There was a perception that information may be shared back with the police which may result in more trouble for them. They understood this could be a barrier to building the positive relationships that were required to address individual circumstances and provide support. They said they wanted youth justice workers to show they **"care" about their work and what happens to them** and not be thought of as an offender or criminal. Children also expressed the importance of **appropriate environments** to facilitate effective collaboration saying they **"need to be comfortable"** to be able to express themselves properly.

There were mixed views about how effective collaboration practice and interventions were. Overwhelmingly, children said the **main benefit of working together with YJSs was the support they received from their youth justice practitioners in helping them find a job so they could earn money. Children thought YJSs made a difference**, as one child asserted: "I knew that when the YJS got involved I was alright about it because I knew they'd actually do something … When the YJS get involved everyone partners up … YJS makes the biggest difference and then it's CAMHS, then after that no one cares". Conversely, in another example, children discussed a 'Dangers of Weapons and Keeping Safe' group session they had recently attended and felt it had not taught them anything new. They said they *were* given a choice of whether they wanted to attend or not and they had chosen to participate, but felt obligated to attend as it contributed to their reparation hours; however, they had not been consulted on what content the course might usefully contain. Children thought appointments differed depending on what youth justice order they were on, but they were clear that **having more contacts did not necessarily have a positive impact on change and found frequent visits from practitioners "annoying"** rather than supportive or helpful.

PRG discussions prompted the RA to ask participant children pertinent questions about developing relationships with youth justice professionals across the Youth Justice System, how they felt they were treated, contents of support and intervention plans, and what a successful outcome of "being asked their views and listened to" would look like from their perspective.

Exploring collaboration effectiveness with participant children

Table 5 summarises the main themes and sub-themes that have been generated from the analysis of research findings in relation to Collaboration Effectiveness. Three main themes (with contributory sub-themes) were developed from the dataset relating to children's perceptions and experience of 'collaboration effectiveness': positive relationships between children and professionals (including professionals who 'care'), counteracting power-dynamics (including power play and environmental factors, enablers and barriers) and developing effective interventions and support together (including choice and contribution to decisions, children's views need to make a difference, and inconsistencies across the Youth Justice System). Each of the overarching themes and sub-themes are presented and interpreted below, providing examples which illustrate and support the points being made. Children were asked about what work or activities they did with youth justice professionals, whether they had an intervention/custody plan, about youth justice processes, their contribution to decisions about interventions, and whether they had any choice about reparation hours and positive activities. Further questions explored what they thought about the activities they participated in and whether or not they felt they were successful.

Table 5: Collaboration effectiveness – identified themes and sub-themes

Theme 1
Positive relationships between children and professionals
Sub-theme
i. Professionals who 'care'
Theme 2
Counteracting power-dynamics
Sub-themes
i. Power play ii. Environmental factors: enablers and barriers
Theme 3
Developing effective interventions and support together
Sub-themes
i. Choice and contribution to decisions ii. Children's views making a difference iii. Inconsistencies across the Youth Justice System

1. **Positive relationships between children and professionals**

A recurring theme in the interviews that contributed to children's perception of effective collaboration was building positive relationships between themselves and professionals. Children expressed the importance of developing authentic, inclusive relationships with youth justice professionals who prioritised their wellbeing, demonstrated empathy and genuinely wanted to help them, facilitating engagement where they were able to discuss and agree intervention work and support openly.

i.   *Professionals who 'care'*

Children repeatedly spoke about professional's attributes and employing a "caring" workforce across the Youth Justice System during their interviews, staff who understood the importance of trusting and respectful relationships as well as someone who they perceived as wanting to support them and not only as a means of employment. Two children spoke about their involvement in YJS staff recruitment processes, including developing interview questions and joining an interview panel to ask their questions. The potential for other youth justice agencies to consider adopting this approach is discussed later under the 'developing practice' section.

The following quote from a child in custody illustrates the need for youth justice staff who care about children and are committed to support them:

> Just hire people that actually care, a lot of people just take the job to get paid, but then you also get people who actually want to help young people. (Boy, Age 17, YOI1)

Just hire people that actually care, a lot of people just take the job to get paid, but then you also get people who actually want to help young people. (Boy, Age 17, YOI1)

Children intuitively knew when adults showed passion for their job and their attention was focused on them as individuals, and they understood how this contributed to their own positive engagement, as illustrated by a child being supported by a YJS:

> He [youth justice practitioner] obviously sees other kids but in the sessions with me he makes me feel he's really here for me, to benefit me… He is one of those people who does actually care, he's not like I have to do this cos it's his job. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

Children were aware of the time it took to build positive relationships and often talked about the need to develop understanding and trust with youth justice professionals that enabled them to work constructively together. The following quote is from a girl who had been involved with youth justice services for many years and shared her thoughts on building trusting relationships:

Having people by your side helps, people that you can trust being by your side, having the right youth justice workers, the right police officers … at first it didn't feel right, no one really understood me, but now I feel like they do and I can work with them. (Girl, Age 16, YJS3)

2. Counteracting power-dynamics

The role of power-dynamics cut across all youth justice agencies and featured extensively in interviews with children when exploring collaboration effectiveness and their involvement in decision-making processes. Children often remarked on the power play and imbalance between themselves and adult professionals, revealing how collaboration in practice challenges the status quo of power dynamics. Interviews identified positive environmental factors (physical and atmospheric) which enabled children to feel comfortable and encouraged engagement. Conversely, children revealed unequal social interactions between themselves and youth justice professionals whereby children perceived adults used their dominance, leaving them feeling unable to participate in matters affecting them, especially in court hearings and interactions with the police.

i.   Power play

Children perceived adults to be using deliberate power play over them by using forceful tactics and unfair practice. This was a recurring topic raised by children which impacted on them feeling able to speak to ensure their voices were heard and acted upon. Many children felt ill prepared to speak because of the uncomfortable environment in youth courts and thought that magistrates/district judges used their powerful position, which resulted in the children's non-engagement. Children spoke about feeling anxious in the majority of court situations because of the 'horrible' atmosphere and their perception of an unequal power game between children and adult professionals, which they considered counterproductive to enabling them to speak and participate in hearings if they wished to; the following quote demonstrates this perception by children that courts are difficult environments for them:

> *The pressure in there [court] is bad, so it makes you not want to say anything, because it's so stressful, everyone is looking at you, eyes from all directions, so it makes you feel very uncomfortable. (Boy, Age 15, YJS3)*

The pressure in there [court] is bad, so it makes you not want to say anything, because it's so stressful, everyone is looking at you, eyes from all directions, so it makes you feel very uncomfortable. (Boy, Age 15, YJS3)

Further insight revealed by children of the impact of power imbalance between them and adult professionals showed that it was most apparent during their interactions with the police, with their views often seeming to be dismissed because of their age, child, and offender status; officers appeared uninterested in what they had to say, as one child explained:

It [police service] just needs to be more consistent and for them to actually think that what I've got to say is important and not just ignore it cos I'm a kid and they're an adult. They're just not interested in my viewpoint; they think they know better. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

Most children interviewed who had a social worker reported that their worker changed frequently which limited opportunities for relationship building; additionally children reported they were not consulted about their circumstances and often felt that they did not have any influence about what happened to them. Children commented on the control that social workers seemed to hold over them; they perceived them to be interfering in their private family life and accused them of bullying behaviour, making situations worse. As one child explained, families were expected to do as they were told and comply with social worker's rules:

They [social workers] love the power they have over everybody … so you do as I say otherwise you aren't getting your kids home. (Girl, Age, 17, YJS2)

ii.   *Environmental factors: enablers and barriers*

Children identified the importance of a welcoming and relaxed environment, both in terms of physical spaces and ambiance, as enabling them to engage in collaborative working relationships. This idea interconnects with the positive interpersonal skills of professionals outlined previously which encouraged children to feel comfortable, confident and unjudged enabling them to express themselves freely in safe spaces. Children constantly referred to one of the YOIs and its staff as "calm" and "chilled" with a more relaxed atmosphere which contradicted their original perceptions of being in held in custody. Many children remarked they were pleasantly surprised by the balanced approach practised at this establishment enabling them to engage more constructively with officers, as one child explained:

It's not really what I expected, it's alright, it's calm here. I thought it was going to be much tougher, a harsh environment, it isn't like what you see on the movies and that, like some big guy in charge using his power over you. (Boy, Age 17, YOI2)

Children who were involved with YJSs also thought that a positive physical environment was important to enabling positive co-working conditions, with some stating that meeting rooms were "boring" and that they preferred their sessions with practitioners to take place in more child-friendly spaces, for example a café or somewhere outside. The following quote is multi-faceted (interlinking with being listened to and caring staff) and summarised how children felt about the professionals they would like to work with and how the environment played a part.

The rooms are good, it's a nice calm environment, the people are nice and friendly, they listen to what you have to say, they care about what you think, there's a nice vibe, cos that's what I go on. If it doesn't feel good how can I be involved in what's going on. (Boy, Age 15, YJS3)

Conversely, children faced the barriers of restrictive environments like police cells, court buildings and custodial settings (especially evident in YOI1 on the initial fieldwork visit) reducing opportunities for collaboration and adversely impacting opportunities for children to have any influence on their circumstances. Many children spoke about their experiences of being arrested by the police and locked in sparse "dark" and "cold" police cells for lengthy periods of time and although they were offered a blanket, food and drinks (verging on inedible and undrinkable according to many children), rarely being let out for fresh air. They emphasised the lack of communication, boredom, how anxious and intimidated they felt and the damaging impact on their well-being and mental health. The following quote from one child illustrates how many children felt about their experience of being detained in a police cell and the negative impact it had:

> Being in the cells that long was awful … they shouldn't be allowed to keep us that long in there … I was kept locked in a cell for 4 days, that was really hard for me … I didn't have anything to do. (Boy, Age 16, YOI2)

Children regularly talked about being held in inappropriate places in court buildings while they waited to be called into the court room itself, and how un-child friendly this experience was, with minimal stimulation causing apprehension and anxiety, as this quote illustrates:

> Courts are meant to be child friendly, but that's not always the case … I stayed there all day, locked in a room with nothing, or in cells for adults, in these blank rooms with nothing to do. It's really stressful, you hear keys and think this could be me but then you hear them go past and you think - oh no.
> (Boy, Age 17, YOI1)

The harsh environment in YOI1 was not conducive to open communication with children. Some revealed that unless they were on the 'gold' enhanced privilege wing (the top tier of the behaviour incentive and privileges scheme) in the establishment, they spent long periods of time in their poorly maintained cells, with a restrictive regime and limited participation opportunities, as this child emphasised:

On [gold] wing, like on here most pads are like fresh, but on [mainstream] wing it's rotten, kids have written on the walls, in the pad there's just loads of writing all over the walls. (Boy, Age 18, YOI1)

3. Developing effective interventions and support together

Developing effective interventions and support together was a significant theme, with children involved with YJSs reporting that activities were decided jointly with youth justice practitioners, mostly individually focused, and included advice and support about considering different actions and making wiser choices in future situations. A range of activities (including court ordered requirements) were on offer to choose from in order to meet children's different interests. Children's views making a difference to what subsequently happens was important in *demonstrating* that they were being listened to and influencing decision-making processes, as was highlighted in the earlier findings section about children's understanding about collaboration. Here it was important in defining what worked or not from children's perspectives; but their responses disclosed inconsistent collaboration practice, highlighting differences between custodial settings, courts and children's social care.

i. *Choice and contribution to decisions*

Children spoke positively about being involved in decision-making about developing interventions and the type of support they needed from YJSs. Most children said that they contributed to discussions about the work they undertook, reparation activities and agreed tasks during Referral Order panels and other meetings with various youth justice professionals. Having a choice of activities was considered important to children and to facilitate this, a good range of activities was sometimes on offer (e.g., gardening, clearing up the local beach, animal care, cooking, drama, boxing, art groups, fishing and a bike workshop). However, some children also spoke about *not* having any choice and being told what they had to on their order, expressing that they would rather have done something else; whereas for others, choice was limited to simply deciding whether or not they wanted to engage in a particular activity.

Children being supported by YJSs said that they were asked to decide what work they would be doing with their youth justice practitioner, with options discussed being forward-looking and based on their interests, as the following quote illustrates:

They were asking me what I wanted to achieve, what I was interested in ... what support I needed to put into my achievements. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

Children frequently talked about discussing a range of issues with their youth justice practitioner, describing the support as "good", and that referrals to specialist agencies such as CAMHS had made a "positive" difference. Many children disclosed that they had experienced trauma, family pressures, mental health problems, and discrimination, all of which negatively impacted their sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

When youth justice practitioners asked children what help was needed, they reported that this was beneficial, as the following quote illustrates:

> She [youth justice practitioner] was asking me about what might work best for me, to see how I feel about it all … We have done a lot of work for me to feel better about myself and that, which has really helped me in general. (Girl, Age 17, YJS2)

She [youth justice practitioner] was asking me about what might work best for me, to see how I feel about it all … We have done a lot of work for me to feel better about myself and that, which has really helped me in general. (Girl, Age 17, YJS2)

Choice of activities was important to children, because to encourage engagement in such activities they needed to offer a range of pursuits to meet children's varying interests. The reoccurring theme of being asked their opinion of what they would like to do, offering choice, and discussing it with their youth justice practitioner, is voiced in the following quote:

> The hours you have to do for your order, we discuss it, there are some choices, stuff you might want to do, not just boring things … this service is good at asking what your interests are, what my views are and stuff. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

ii.   Children's views making a difference

For collaboration to be effective, children's views needed to make a difference to what happened to them when they were involved in youth justice services. The quote below demonstrates how children's views influenced intervention planning and joint decision-making with their youth justice practitioner and the interlinkage with RQ1 (collaboration understandings) of being asked for their views and then listened to:

> I definitely had a say into what went into the plan, we did it together 100%. I was definitely telling them what I wanted to do really and what I thought I needed support with. They asked me and they listened to what I had to say. (Boy, Age, 18, YJS3)

Conversely, children in custodial settings revealed that their views often had a negligible impact on what happened to them. As the quote below illustrates, just because children were *asked* for their opinion did not necessarily result any relevant subsequent action, more likely to foster frustration than if they had not been asked in the first place:

We get the opportunity to say how we feel but nothing gets done about it, just because they ask us about things doesn't mean anything will get done … They just need to listen, take what we're saying into account and actually act on it. (Boy, Age 17, YOI1)

iii. Inconsistencies across the Youth Justice System

Children's perceptions and experience of custody varied depending on establishment and their incentive scheme level. They reported limited consultation about the activities on offer, or that when they had been asked for their suggestions it either took a long time to be implemented or was ignored. Children provided further practice examples relating to their interactions with other youth justice agencies; in relation to the police, they stated that there were many barriers to effective collaboration; experiences were dependent on individual police officers, but positive experiences were an exception to the rule. Furthermore, children expressed mostly negative views of collaboration in courts and joint decision-making with children's social care services**.**

The harsh environment in YOI1 was not conducive to open two-way communication with children. Many reported that unless they were on the gold enhanced level privilege wing they spent long periods 'banged up' in their cell with nothing to do, minimal association time with greatly reduced opportunities to participate in positive activities, and limited openings to engage in purposeful conversations with case workers. In the following insightful extract, a child described his negative feelings about his experience on a non-enhanced wing and the negative effect it had on his wellbeing and behaviour:

> So a lot more regime here, on [other wing] you have very little regime, it's like being a caged animal, not very nice … you've got nothing to do, no regime, the anger builds up and you start getting anxious and stressed. When I was on the other wing, the littlest thing could make you want to kick off. (Boy, Age 17, YOI1)

Children were mostly critical of their interactions with the police, finding them to be un-child-friendly, aggressive and abusive of their power, leaving no scope for effective collaboration to materialise. This interlinks with the earlier power play sub-theme and children's perception that the police use this deliberately to undermine them, as illustrated through the following quote:

> *They [police]shouldn't be treating under 18s like that, I'm a minor and they know how they treat people ain't right, it's just a power thing with them innit. (Boy, Age 17, YOI2)*

Children expressed negative views of being able to engage in any meaningful collaboration in court. They were rarely asked for their opinions and if they were, children felt too "stressed" or "scared", reporting poor communication and a lack of information from court staff as a barrier to their engagement. The quote below from a child in custody encapsulate the viewpoint of many children's experiences in the court process:

> They didn't really speak to me, it's not very interactive, they don't ask you anything. You're just in the holding cell, you come out see the judge, get sentenced and go to jail innit. (Boy, Age 17, YOI2)

RQ3 Conclusion: How do children perceive and experience 'effective' practice in collaboration, such as the effectiveness of processes and how collaboration outcomes should be measured?

Building positive relationships and counteracting power dynamics were reoccurring themes and can be seen as building-blocks that underpin the process of facilitating effective collaboration with youth justice organisations and professionals, whilst contributing to children's ability to influence matters affecting them. Nevertheless, as is apparent, from children's perspectives barriers exist which mitigate against full collaboration across all youth justice agencies. Responses from children who were being supported by YJSs indicated that they were generally able to contribute to decision-making about their interventions and engage in joint planning (providing effective practice examples), had a choice of activities, and in most cases their views made a difference to what then happened to them. Working together and having input into decisions on matters affecting them is clearly significant to children when it comes to understanding what contributes to effective collaboration. In contrast, custodial establishments offered an inconsistent experience of collaboration practice (as well as practice more generally), dependent on setting and behaviour scheme level. Moreover courts were found to be *un*-child-friendly places, with a lack of information provided about what was happening and with minimal two-way communication overseen by authoritarian figures, leaving children feeling frightened and unable to participate in proceedings as they did not understand what was happening.

RQ4: Practice development

This final RQ explored to what extent 'Child First' collaboration practice and decision-making processes had been embedded across youth justice agencies and, based on children's experience and opinions, what improvements could be made. The section begins with an overview of the discussions with the PRG regarding RQ4 and follows with a summary the main findings from participant children.

Summary of PRG Discussions about 'Practice Development': Improvements included recruiting appropriate staff who 'care' and neutralising power-dynamics.

PRG children were involved in conversations with researchers about what needed to change to support Child First practice and their youth justice experience of collaboration. Children reiterated their views about recruiting appropriate staff across youth justice agencies, including people who **genuinely "care" and were "nice", asked their opinions and took notice of what they had to say**. Youth justice practitioners and social workers not constantly changing and **"not giving up on kids"** were also important issues raised by children.

Children spoke about employing **justice-experienced Peer Mentors** and how they could be "inspiring" as they were an example of how they were able to "turn their own lives around". However, one child was suspicious of this approach, saying he would need to be convinced that adults were telling the truth when they said they had been to jail, but conceding that they could be good role models. They thought youth justice interventions should be focused on what they wanted to achieve, for example: "Because I want to be a social worker, she [youth justice practitioner] contacted a social worker so I could talk to her about doing the job and that, so that was good".

PRG children were especially vocal about the need for **improvements in the police force relating to abuse of power**, not being respected, not being asked for their opinions and having no influence on any decisions made about them. Similarly, they expressed that **improvements were required in courts, to make the environment more child-friendly and address power dynamics**. One child said "the judge has so much power, more than any other human being … but they're a normal human being when they take off that hat on their head … it's about power". They also suggested using **advocates if children had mental health issues/communication difficulties** and needed help to express themselves so their needs were understood and addressed appropriately.

The RA ensured that interviews included specific questions for children about what needed to improve or change about involving them in decision-making processes and plans affecting them. Practice development findings from participant children were shared back with the PRG and suggestions matched with what they thought was required to continue embedding Child First collaboration and decision-making processes across the whole of the Youth Justice System.

Exploring practice development with participant children

Table 6 summarises the main themes and sub-themes which were generated from analysis of the data in relation to practice development. Two main themes (with contributory sub-themes) were developed from the dataset relating to children's experiences of Child First practice and what improvements they thought should be made, specifically in relation to collaboration with children: listening to and understanding children (with sub-themes of utilising children's ideas for practice improvement, recognising and counteracting power-dynamics, creating child-friendly environments and keeping children informed) and involving children in

decision-making about issues affecting them (with sub-themes of strategic level: business planning and recruiting caring professionals; practice level: ensuring that plans prioritise and support children's own goals and utilising justice-experienced mentors to support collaboration with children).

This section highlights areas of practice where *children* identified the need for further development or change. It ties in with what they said about *in*effective practice and barriers to collaboration processes. Each of the overarching themes and sub-themes are presented and interpreted below, providing examples which illustrate and support the points being made. The RA explained the term 'Child First' and provided an overview of each of the four tenets of seeing children as children, promoting prosocial identity development for positive child outcomes, collaboration with children (central to this project and this particular RQ) and promoting diversion from offending. Additional questions followed which specifically focused on the 'collaboration' tenet; children were asked how their views were sought, whether they were enabled to participate in decisions about matters affecting them, what needed to change, and any suggestions they had for improvements.

Table 6: Practice Development – identified themes and sub-themes

Theme 1
Listen to and understand children
Sub-themes

i.   utilise children's ideas for practice improvement
   ii.   recognise and counteract power-dynamics
  iii.   create child-friendly environments
   iv.   keep children informed

Theme 2
Involve children in decision-making about matters affecting them
Sub-themes
i.   strategic level: business planning and recruiting caring professionals   ii.   practice level: ensuring that plans prioritise and support children's own goals and utilising justice-experienced mentors to support collaboration with children

1. **Listen to and understand children**

It is clear from the findings that children's experiences of Child First collaboration practice are mixed, with some parts of the Youth Justice System better than others. For YJSs, collaboration experiences were generally positive; within custody, it varied depending on the establishment and incentive scheme level; whilst interactions and engagement with the police, courts and children's social care services were mostly negative.

Children suggested many ideas for practice improvements to better embed collaboration in practice and encourage active engagement, especially in relation to understanding and listening to children more and encouraging children to be part of decision-making processes across the whole of the Youth Justice System.

Children frequently offered suggestions about how professionals working in the Youth Justice System could improve their practice by listening to children, understanding them better and working differently to improve outcomes. The following quote sums up what most children thought of the various youth justice agencies:

> The police don't listen, solicitors don't listen, the YOT are alright, but everything is just slow, I'm always waiting around for something to change. (Boy, Age 17, YJS3)

i. Utilise children's ideas for practice improvement

Children were asked what could be improved to make their experience more child-friendly and collaborative. Children were especially and consistently critical of the police, voicing that practice needed to change to be more child centric and to include them when making decisions. In the following extract, a child (of mixed ethnicity) felt that the police did not understand him and observed that he had not seen any police of colour in his area, making an interesting suggestion to address this:

> The police need improving, they need to transfer some police here, brown police officers, or more diverse, I've never seen a coloured [sic] or different looking police officer - they're all white - with more experiences …They make mistakes all the time, they need to transfer some police or do some training. (Boy, Age 17, YJS1)

For that child, having police officers who reflected his ethnicity was an important part of feeling understood by them as a service. Some children thought that they could be better supported in the community, rather than being given a prison sentence, but were not part of any discussions in court about the most appropriate outcome. As the child explained in the following quote, incarceration is not only expensive but ineffective in other ways:

> It would be better to be dealt with in the community, on a tag and get help in the community … in here you lose all your contacts with the outside and it costs a lot of money for them to keep me in here and I'm here for just really stupid things, criminal damage and that. (Boy, Age 16, YOI2)

> *It would be better to be dealt with in the community, on a tag and get help in the community … in here you lose all your contacts with the outside and it costs a lot of money for them to keep me in here and I'm here for just really stupid things, criminal damage and that. (Boy, Age 16, YOI2)*

As noted previously, children were clear about the importance of (appropriate) education in supporting their future aspirations. In the following extract

a child suggests that YOIs need another layer of collaboration, with local schools and colleges, to support and improve education being delivered in the secure estate:

> I think they [YOIs] should like maybe work with the local schools … somebody could work with them or even colleges … obviously, they can send work down, you don't always need a computer to do it. Just give you the textbook. All the information should be in the textbook. They could work all this out. (Boy, Age 17, YOI1)

ii. Recognise and counteract power dynamics

'Power dynamics' was a recurring theme, as presented earlier in the 'effective collaboration' section. Power dynamics between adults and children need to be examined and addressed, together with impressions of 'power play' which children perceived, to enable effective collaboration, across the whole Youth Justice System, but especially within the police service. Children repeatedly criticised the police for overusing their power and having negative views about children; they called for improvements in how children are perceived and treated, as the following extract illustrates:

> They [the police] need to be better at their job, they just think everyone is a bad person … I think they're abusing kids nowadays … they got the power over everything, because they're the police and the law … They're just too aggressive I think and with their powers they just take it too far. (Boy, Age 15, YJS)

iii. Create child-friendly environments

Children spoke about the importance of child-friendly environments, with findings relating to this theme presented in the earlier section on collaboration effectiveness. Children articulated how comfortable spaces enabled participation and collaboration practices, providing a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. One child spoke about the opportunity he had been given to improve the physical environment at the YJS to make it more child-friendly, suggesting that this could be included as an intervention option for justice-involved children.

> The meeting rooms, they're really boring, so [youth justice practitioner] has asked if I would like to put some ideas about making them more child-friendly, with some drawings … kids can do drawings as part of the work they do with this service. (Boy, Age 15, YJS2)

Furthermore, as previously discussed, courts were identified as being un-child-friendly places in the research findings; however one child described a more child-focused approach whilst waiting outside court, that could be adopted more widely in other areas:

> *I was just in a meeting type room and we were playing Jenga until I was called into court. I thought that was a child-friendly way to deal with me instead of being kept in a cell. (Boy, Age 17, YOI2)*

iv. Keep children informed

Keeping children informed about what was happening featured in children's understand of collaboration, with children suggesting room for improvement across all youth justice agencies; to enable them to participate more fully in decision-making processes about matters affecting them, children needed clear, timely information. One child suggested that providing children with information about Referral Order panels could help to break down barriers between children and adults, and help children be better prepared for the meeting; he made the following suggestion:

> Give them [children] some information about what's going to happen before they're in the meeting as a lot of people are going to get stressed … maybe include photos of the room or sharing an example contract beforehand or even photos of the volunteers … just knowing who's going to be there and having those details first … It gives people a bit of forewarning of what to expect. (Boy, Age 18, YJS2)

All custodial settings had feedback mechanisms in place, but children often stated that channels of communication needed to improve once their views and ideas had been sought; staff needed to close the feedback loop by informing children about what had actually happened as a result of their input, or explaining why something had not changed. Furthermore, children in YOIs said that feedback forums and groups should be more inclusive of *all* children, rather than those on the top tier of the behaviour incentive scheme. Some children said that they did not know about the feedback forums and groups taking place, so custodial establishments need to ensure everyone is informed of their existence. A child in custody suggested regularly involving senior management to remind them of the importance of hearing and acting on children's voices.

> Maybe they should do like a meeting in here, where you get like, higher superiors to come down maybe once a month … Maybe like every six months or a year like … we report things that we can't change as a prison but they may be able to help … and a representative from each wing. (Boy, Age 18, YOI1)

2. Involve children in decision- making about matters affecting them

Collaboration with children in decision-making is at the heart of this research project and children thought that they could be involved on two levels - a strategic level (business planning and recruiting professionals who care) and practice level (plans that support children's goals, improving feedback mechanisms and peer mentors).

i. Strategic level: business planning and recruiting professionals who care

Two children spoke about being involved in strategic-level activities and decisions, including incorporating their suggestions into business plans and participation on a staff recruitment panel. Children have the right to be able to contribute to matters affecting them (United Nations, 1989) but facilitating their involvement into service delivery planning could also benefit youth justice organisations in many ways, for example by ensuring that services meet children's various needs, understanding what is important from their perspective, and communicating effectively. In the following quote, a child explained his role in improving the business plan in terms of the language used to ensure that it could be understood by all children.

> We reviewed the business plan that had been put forward … I mostly focused on the issue of language used [in the plan] and that people have different mental ages, so that they could understand it … so I wanted to focus on getting stuff for different mental ages. (Boy, Age 15, YJS2)

Another child was involved in youth justice staff interviews which led her to participate on an interview panel for a new YJS social worker. She was enthusiastic about the opportunity on two counts, firstly because she was interested in becoming a social worker herself and secondly because it enabled her to realise that caring practitioners and building positive relations matched her own expectations for employing suitable candidates. This links back to the 'professionals who care' sub-theme highlighted earlier under 'effective collaboration'. In the following extract, the girl recounted what happened and how she was pleasantly surprised about the candidate's response to her question:

> I got to ask about a question and my question was - 'How would you deal with it, if you turned up to see a child and they were angry and frustrated what would you do?' And she answered really well, she was like 'stay calm, get to know what's wrong, building relationships. It was nice to see those sorts of questions being asked instead of can you do this and that, they actually care about what happens to children so that were a lot better than I thought. (Girl, Age 17, YJS2)

Hiring the right professionals to work with children in the Youth Justice System should be a priority for improving practice in relation to collaboration and engagement, as our findings have highlighted the importance that children place on relationship-building and staff with good interpersonal skills who care. This interlinks with the staff recruitment point made above. Some children gave their ideas of what attributes a

good youth justice practitioner needs and the support required to help them move forward, as demonstrated in this excerpt:

> Being young, having passion and energy, wanting to help young people, because the majority of the officers that work here, they do their job and get paid, they don't come here to help young people … they should actually want to improve things, rehabilitate people. (Boy, Age 17, YOI1)

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ii. Practice level: plans that prioritise and support children's life goals and justice experienced peer mentors

Children's contribution to decision-making at a practice level needs to improve because it is crucial that they are given the opportunity to base their own intervention plan on what they want to happen as part of their order and to assist them in moving forward; for example, supporting access to appropriate education and training, and interventions/support focused on achieving the children's *self-stated* goals to help them on their life journey. Children not only expressed the importance of education but emphasised the importance of it being appropriate and what *they* chose to do. In illustration, some children had been doing GCSEs and A levels prior to their incarceration, but found it difficult to continue with their studies as these levels of provision were unavailable to them in custody:

> I want to do my Biology GCSE cos I want a science and that, but they don't offer it, they only do maths and English as proper subjects … They don't have many options for you here … they given me some mock exams and that but there's no science teacher here. (Boy, Age 17, YOI2)

Children who had been supported by justice-experienced mentors thought there should be more development in this area, as they foster a culture of collaboration and teamwork. Peer Mentoring was suggested by children in YOI2 as an area for practice development, who spoke positively about an initiative in which they had been involved. Their peer mentors had offered support, advice and guidance based on their own lived experience of youth justice and custodial incarceration. The scheme aimed to deter them from getting into further trouble by showing them that change was possible and focused on future achievements and goals. Peer mentors can be a positive role model for children in custody and positively impact change, as they are better able to understand their circumstances. One child explained that he thought it would be helpful to work with someone with similar experiences who was therefore able to empathise, as he felt that custody officers did not understand what he had gone though.

There's this person who I'm going to work with from the YJS, who has been in jail before and I said I'd work with him, he knows what it's like, his experience of his life and he should be able to help me properly … cos the other workers they don't know shit, they don't know how I feel, they ain't got a clue what it's like being me, they don't know what's going through my head. (Boy, Age 16, YOI2)

RQ4 Conclusion: What is the extent and nature of 'Child First' collaboration practice and decision-making processes across youth justice agencies and, based on children's experience, how could these be improved?

This question reviewed children's experiences against the 'collaboration with children' tenet of Child First practice and reflected on the findings from other RQs of collaboration understandings, objectives and effective practice and children's ideas for changes and improvements. Overwhelmingly, children wanted collaboration practice improvements to ensure that they were asked for their opinions, understood, and that their voices were heard, in order to influence decision-making about matters affecting them both strategically and on a day-to-day practice level. Moreover, youth justice agencies need to employ staff with the appropriate experience and who are genuinely concerned about supporting them to move forward positively with their lives.

The majority of children being supervised by YJSs said that collaboration practices were effective and there was clear evidence that they were listening to children, however the link between what children wanted to happen and tasks assigned to intervention plans needed to be better integrated. More significant changes for policing practices were highlighted, especially relating to children's perceptions of purposeful power play, which is hindering collaboration practice development. 'Power play' was also raised in court proceedings, alongside a lack of information from court staff and barristers, impeding children's ability to make informed decisions. An inconsistent picture of collaboration practices (and of practice in general) in custody was reported, dependent on establishment and the behaviour incentive scheme level children were on. Even at sites where children felt they could have some input into decisions affecting them, staffing levels and inconsistent practice left child feeling they had limited influence about what was happening to them, or being ignored completely.

Discussion of Findings

This report section discusses the research findings in relation to each of the research questions (RQs). It provides an overview of the main themes/sub-themes presented previously and an exploration of how they consolidate and extend existing knowledge related to children's collaboration and youth justice decision making and children's views of effective youth justice collaboration practise.[6] To reiterate, the RQs were:

1) **Collaboration understandings:** How do children perceive and understand their collaboration in the decision-making processes that underpin responses to their offending across the Youth Justice System?

2) **Collaboration objectives:** What do children believe should be the objectives of their collaboration in decision-making processes? Do these perceived objectives differ to those held by adult professionals – if so, how and why?

3) **Collaboration Effectiveness:** How do children perceive and experience 'effective' practice in collaboration, such as the effectiveness of processes and how outcomes should be measured?

4) **Practice development**: What is the extent and nature of children's 'Child First' (e.g., child-centric, collaborative, promotional/positive, diversionary) youth justice experiences (e.g., of decision-making processes) and how could these be improved?

RQ1: Collaboration Understandings

This research question looked at: How do children perceive and understand their collaboration in decision-making processes that underpin responses to their offending across the Youth Justice System?

With exception of Case and Browning (2021), Burns and Creaney, (2023) and Hampson, Nisbet and Case, (2024) there is a dearth of literature and research specifically focusing on the third Child First tenet of 'collaborating with children'. Case and Browning (2021) set out the policy and research evidence for each component of this tenet, encouraging active participation, engagement and wider social exclusion, concluding that despite a solid policy-base, research evidence in the youth justice sphere was 'limited' and 'scant'. There was also significant confusion in its conceptualisation addressed by Hampson et al. (2024) who explicitly

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[6] Note: The authors acknowledge the wider debates of power inequalities and structural harms (e.g., poverty and exploitation) and the impact they can have on children's ability or capacity to contribute to decision-making processes. However, beyond systematic disadvantage of racial discrimination featuring in some conversations, these issues were not raised by children in interviews.

identified 'collaboration' as an umbrella term under which all other aspects (and terminology) of involving children in youth justice processes fit (see page 57 of this report).

RQ1 explored how children perceived and understood collaboration in decision-making processes that underpin responses to their offending across the Youth Justice System. Four main themes were identified from the dataset relating to children's experiences with different agencies and within varying stages of the Youth Justice System. These themes were to:

1. ask children for their opinions
2. listen to children
3. respect children's views (and then responding appropriately)
4. keep children informed (before, during and afterwards).

The responses from children in this research identified what they considered to be the essential elements of 'collaboration', summarised as being encouraged to engage in respectful conversations, being spoken to appropriately, being provided with clear information and having their views considered and taken into account.

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1. **Ask children for their opinions**

Children consistently responded throughout their interviews that they wanted to be asked for their opinion, including their views about their circumstances and support needs to enable joint decision-making through their youth justice journey. Asking children about their experiences enables them to share their stories and feelings, encouraging more meaningful collaboration. In this vein, Lundy's (2007) model to realise Article 12 of the UNCRC (on the right to be heard) helpfully identified the need for a 'space in which children are encouraged to express their views' (p933), expressly including the need to ask them. However, as her research was based entirely within the sphere of education, Lundy concentrated on 'pupils' rather than children, and does not appear to have influenced the arena of *youth justice*-involved children. Despite the recent literature and research focus on justice-involved children and participation and co-creation (see, for example, Smithson

and Jones,2021; Peer Power/YJB, 2021); Creaney et al., 2024), there is minimal focus within this specialist field on this seemingly obvious precursor of actually *asking* children for their opinions. However, missing out this ostensibly obvious step then stymies the rest of the collaboration process before it can begin, providing children no opportunity to meaningfully give their opinions or express their thoughts. Our finding therefore foregrounds the rest of the collaboration process in a much more nuanced way to previous youth justice-based research on participation.

2. Listen to children

Children considered *being listened to* an essential part of collaboration. They wanted youth justice professionals to listen to their *experiences and needs* to create better understanding, and to listen to their *ideas and suggestions* and *what was important to them*, which would enable their meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Children also provided many examples of when they felt they were *not* listened to by professionals they came into contact, including police officers, judges and court officers, custody staff and social workers. For example, as one child said, when talking about the many social workers she had experienced "*everyone's life is different … you need to speak to people to find out what's going on and listen, but they're not interested*".

This finding echoes aspects of previous research, for example Kilkelly et al. (2005) in their Northern Irish school-focused project, identified children reporting that teachers were not listening to them. Lundy (2007) again in the field of education went further, espousing that children's views should be communicated to somebody with the *responsibility to listen* (Lundy, 2015). Interestingly, youth justice offers better opportunities (at least in theory) than education for this to be realised, in the allocation of a dedicated case worker to each child. Indeed, the success of this model in providing the requisite listening ear was reflected in some of our respondents' opinions of their YJS workers, who they could see were well positioned to give them the undivided attention that active listening requires. The more recent importance placed on relationship-based working within youth justice (see YJB, 2022) appears to be creating the right conditions for children to actually feel listened to by their worker. Kilkelly (2010, p. 39) in another youth-justice-focused project concluded: 'children want to be heard, they want to receive information in a form that they can understand, and to be supported to participate in decisions made about them … they want to speak directly to those who take decisions about them'. However, over a decade later children are *still* feeling unheard, especially within other agencies associated with youth justice (for example, the courts and police), despite this necessity being underlined by multiple scholars (e.g., Hampson, 2017; Case et al., 2020; Smithson et al., 2021; Fullerton et al., 2021), all of whom highlight the importance and benefits of engaging with children and listening to their voices in the planning and service delivery of child-centric youth justice. Our finding that children *want* to be listened to (and their views valued) emphasises this, but the uneven experience with some agencies severely criticised by the children, shows that blockages remain with full implementation across the gamut of youth justice agencies. Meaningful collaboration (from children's perspectives) within youth justice will remain impeded unless all professionals listen to what children have say as part the decision-making process in matters affecting them.

> **Children felt labelled as 'criminals' and judged negatively by police officers, which impacted the way police communicated with them, by ignoring their rights and neglecting to involve them in decision-making.**

When children spoke about being *not* being listened to, the agency most criticised for their interactions with them was the police. Children felt labelled as 'criminals' and judged negatively by police officers, which impacted the way police communicated with them, by ignoring their rights and neglecting to involve them in decision-making. As the following quote from a child confirms "*police have me labelled as a gang member. I don't personally see I'm a gang member … they label and target quite a few young people that way*". This negative labelling of children is damaging, as a raft of research has continually demonstrated (Tannenbaum, 1938; Becker, 1963; Bernburg, 2019), serving to perpetuate a negative identity (and consequential treatment within the Youth Justice System; McAra and McVie, 2007) and undermining the promotion of strengths-based collaborative practice espoused by Child First to develop pro-social identity for sustainable desistance (Hazel and Case, 2024). It is also contrary to the previous National Strategy for the Policing of Children and Young People (2015), which states: 'we must listen to them [children] and act upon what they tell us' (p. 10) as one of the main priority areas. Unfortunately, our findings showed that little progress has been made towards this over the near decade since this strategy was first introduced. Furthermore, our study provides further evidence to support the findings of the Nuffield funded research of Kemp et al. (2023) who found that police custody is experienced as 'harsh and punitive, fostering resentment and undermining trust in the police and the wider Youth Justice System' (Kemp, 2023, p. 4). The study recommended that the police implement a 'Child First approach … viewing child suspects as children rather than adults and/or "offenders", encouraging collaboration with them while they are detained, and seeking to maximise opportunities to divert them away from the stigma of coming into contact with the criminal justice system' (ibid.).

3. Respect children's views (and respond appropriately)

Children reported that they wanted their views to be *recognised* by professionals, their opinions *respected* and *taken into account* within decision-making processes. Whilst children's responses indicated that YJSs seemed generally good at respecting their views, this again was not the case during exchanges with the police. The findings from this study have not only reaffirmed the literature in this area, but developed understanding further from children's viewpoints, identifying where practice is still falling short. The YJB Participation Strategy (2016, p. 4) advocated that 'young people's voices are heard and respected - young people's views will be taken seriously and listened to' and 'we will let children know what has happened' (the latter being an aspect covered in the next section). Jacob et al. (2023) asserted that good communication, understanding, reciprocal respect, trust and a sense of fairness are essential properties for the development of effective professional relationships, with Wainright et al. (2021) adding the importance of reciprocal respectful communication through empathetic listening. Additionally, Smithson et al. (2021) demonstrated that *respecting* and *acknowledging* children's rights, and *enabling them* to contribute to decision-making processes

are vital to meaningful 'participation' and 'co-production' (all aspects of collaboration). These conditions correspond with this idea of respectful conversations and link into what makes for effective collaboration and positive relationships between children and adults (discussed later under RQ3), but our findings also show that these known conditions are *still* not necessarily routinely experienced by justice-involved children.

Children interviewed in this study were clear that one of the keys to knowing that their views were valued and respected was seeing that they actually make a difference to decisions made about them. In too many cases this was not their experience when coming into contact with the police, the courts, social workers, custody staff at one of the YOIs and the SCH and even their own solicitors. For example, a child spoke about how his opinions were not valued and were ignored by the duty solicitor: "*duty solicitors, they're tossers … they don't ask for your point of view and don't listen to what you want*". This also relates to Lefevre's (2021) reference to social workers needing to find out about what children think and feel, listen to their views and ensure that their responses make a difference in matters concerning them. In the youth justice sphere, Carr (2024, p. 84) introduces the term "preferential credence" within the context of children's collaborative-justice, to extend the idea of child's knowledge not being given equal weight and value by professionals; asserting that adults and professionals undervalue and subtly exclude the voice of the child through prescribed structures and frameworks. This point ties back to the participatory nature of this study and co-creation with the PRG, whereby this study prioritised and valued children's knowledge and insights at different stages of the research process. For collaboration to be meaningful in practice, effective and sustainable therefore, children need to believe that their involvement will *influence* outcomes, decisions and processes. As this study has found, not all youth justice professionals demonstrate respect for children's views by incorporating them into decision-making about interventions and support.

4. Keep children informed (before, during, and afterwards)

Children expressed that being *kept fully informed* was an essential aspect of collaboration, and needed to comprise two elements: initially being given clear information in child-friendly language, and two-way communication closing the feedback loop (providing evidence that their views had been taken into account). They often felt there was a lack of information provided, especially by the police and courts, which left them feeling '*anxious*' and '*confused*' about what was happening to them. Despite all secure settings providing youth councils/forums for communication and gaining their views, children voiced their concerns that feedback loops did not operate effectively to keep them informed of what difference their opinions had made within decision-making processes (especially important when children are not involved in the moment at which decisions are actually made). These experiences are in sharp contrast to the YJB Participation Strategy (2016), which states that 'we will always make sure we give young people feedback when we ask them their opinions, especially when we aren't able to do something' (p. 5).

The experiences of our research participants reaffirmed previous literature highlighting that it is crucial for children to have information available in accessible formats to enable them to fully participate in collaboration with youth justice professionals, and that information should be 'reinforced, repeated and refined as the process unfolds' (Stalford et al., 2017, p. 215). As highlighted previously in this report, justice-involved children frequently have speech and language difficulties and neurodiverse conditions which may impact on their ability to process information, communicate, comprehend and interact with people. Age-appropriate information and clear language, using words with which children are familiar (avoiding jargon and acronyms) need to be used by adults, checking out with children that they have actually understood the information being provided so they know what is happening them, which will promote their engagement and *joint working* with practitioners (doing *with* children, not *to* them). This point is illustrated by a child speaking about the information provided by his YJS: "*The information they've given me is clear, they talk to me in a way I can understand and I can ask stuff if I'm not sure about it*". Children need to be involved in *co-creating* accessible

> **Children need to be involved in co-creating accesible information about youth justice agencies and processes that inform them of their right to collaborate in shared decision-making and all matters affecting them, if adult-centric assumptions about what children understand are to be avoided.**

information about youth justice agencies and processes that inform them of their right to collaborate in shared decision-making and all matters affecting them, if adult-centric assumptions about what children understand are to be avoided. Additionally, Case and Browning (2021, p 18) linked this to Child First, stating that 'children want to receive child-accessible information and be supported in participating in decisions made about them'. Without this, children are *dis*empowered by being uninformed (or *effectively* uninformed if information given is inaccessible to them) about the relevant issues.

RQ1 Conclusion: Collaboration Understandings

Findings for RQ1 consolidate knowledge and reaffirm that children need to be part of decision-making about matters affecting them, building upon the developing body of literature and research about participation, co-creation, children's voices being heard, and the general promotion of child participation. The findings have then extended understanding of the specific nuanced nature the *stages* of collaboration and importance of language when defining its elements. It suggests a child-centric alternative to adult-centric explanations and perspectives, importantly from *justice-involved children* themselves, at different stages and across a range of youth justice agencies, but in doing so has demonstrated where this is not yet part of their everyday experience. It is essential for professionals to explicitly seek children's opinions about matters affecting them at all stages of their involvement with youth agencies, actively listen to, value and respect their views by acting on what they are saying, and keeping them fully informed throughout their involvement to enable meaningful

joint decision-making to ensue. Responses from children reaffirm the need for clear language and terminology which children understand, to facilitate informed collaboration in any decision-making processes. Furthermore, it confirms the importance of not labelling children as 'criminals' or 'offenders', which risks the importance of their views being downgraded, but instead all agencies treating them as *children*, promoting their strengths for future-focused positive outcomes.

RQ2: Collaboration Objectives

This research question looked at: What do children believe should be the objectives of their collaboration in decision-making processes? Do these perceived objectives/benefits differ to those held by adult professionals – if so, how and why?

As highlighted previously, there is negligible literature and research specifically addressing collaboration with justice-involved children, with considerable confusion and conflation of terminology (Hampson et al., 2024). Concomitant to this, there is a gap when it comes to the *objectives* of such collaboration. Indeed, even in the more usual areas of participation and co-creation relating to working with children in the Youth Justice System, identifying its objectives appears to have been neglected (or assumed) and seems more likely to be articulated in terms of its *benefits* (for examples see Smithson et al., 2021; Creaney et al., 2023; Day et al., 2023), which is not the same as developing clarity around its objectives, or indeed, relating this to the *children's* understanding of this. The YJB's Participation Strategy (2016, p. 6) emphasised the practical benefits of enhancing children's participation in youth justice services, including improved engagement and behaviour, children feeling more respected and building self-esteem/self-confidence, improved practitioner/children relationships, and improved youth justice services based on need and more inclusive decision-making. However, these benefits are adult-devised and combine what is *perceived* to be helpful to children with system benefits (for example, if collaboration improves attendance and engagement, then *this* becomes the objective, with the usefulness of collaboration then seen through that lens). Malone and Hartung (2010) identified this emphasis on justification of practice through benefits as problematic because it doesn't allow for questioning of systems, and is more likely to further the status quo than allow real challenge which could lead to system change. Collaboration therefore remains *adult*-centric with no reference to what *children* might see as its potential objectives. Case et al. (2020) concurred with these adult-centric benefits but emphasised the importance of engaging fully with children and listening to their voices in the planning and delivery of 'Child First' youth justice, and thus facilitating the 'collaboration' tenet to respond in valid ways to the lived experiences of children who offend. In this way, studies on collaboration (and related concepts) have expressly *neglected* to ask children what they think the objectives should be, tending to present child participants with an adult-centric fait accompli in terms of its conceptualisation.

For this study, RQ2 explicitly explored 'collaboration objectives' and what children thought collaboration practices were aiming to achieve or *should* be aiming to achieve in decision-making processes, with a view to seeing how this differed from adult-centric viewpoints. One main theme and three sub-themes were identified

from the dataset relating to children's experiences with different agencies and through varying stages of the Youth Justice System.

1. Prioritise children's own life goals including asking children what they want to achieve in life, hearing and supporting their aspirations, so they are able to get on with the rest of their lives. A supplementary related question explored whether children felt that their perceived objectives differed to those held by adult professionals. This will also be addressed within each theme/sub-theme.

In summary, children wanted professionals to ask them about their aspirations, listen to what they were saying and offer support to help them to achieve their goals so they could move forward with their life. These themes will be expanded upon and discussed below.

1. Prioritise children's own life goals

The collaboration process needs to facilitate the identification of children's interests in terms of their (future) ambitions and the support required to achieve them (which contributes to and helps facilitate the first Child First tenet to prioritise the best interests of the child and tenet two of promoting pro-social identity).

Children interviewed as part of this study felt the main objective of their collaboration with youth justice agencies was to support them in achieving their *self-expressed life* goals rather than adult-centric, risk-focused *intervention* goals. Children wanted professionals to provide support to enable them to achieve these life goals. The collaboration process needs to facilitate the identification of children's interests in terms of their (future) ambitions and the support required to achieve them (which contributes to and helps facilitate the first Child First tenet to prioritise the best interests of the child and tenet two of promoting pro-social identity). This approach is more effective (to develop intervention actions) than adult focused tasks or Youth Justice System directives. Therefore, interventions should focus on finding out what children want to achieve and setting targets that align with their goals. Currently, AssetPlus assessment processes and youth justice intervention planning does not support the child-centric findings of this study, which therefore constitutes a real challenge to both current systems/practice and youth justice work culture.

The Youth Justice Board's (YJB) updated case management guidance (YJB, 2024) now encourages practitioners to build relationships with children and their parents/guardians in discussions to identify what is important to them, their needs, future goals and aspirations (although it is unclear whether current the AssetPlus system generally allows such actions to be drawn into resulting intervention plans). Nonetheless, this is an encouraging step towards the promotion of child first youth justice collaboration practice and positive outcomes for children, as indicated by the findings from this study. However there is a real danger that this

may not be prioritised by practitioners due to the conflicting role they have of facilitating collaboration (through relationships) and enforcing compliance (Peer Power/YJB, 2021), combined with underdeveloped understanding around the importance (and potential effectiveness) of prioritising children's own aspirations as a *focus* of interventions, which is then likely to be much more effective in reducing reoffending by helping to facilitate their desired future.

i. **Ask children what they want to achieve in life**

The contributory sub-theme of explicitly asking children what they would like to achieve in life links back to the overarching theme identified for RQ1 of 'asking children for their opinions' (discussed in response to children's understanding of the *key elements* of collaboration). If children think that they can use youth justice involvement to work towards achieving their life goals and that this should form the objective of collaboration with their practitioners, then asking children what these goals are (in our sample, they mainly focused on education, employment and avoiding further trouble) is a vital first step. Children who could recall being asked something about life plans acknowledged its importance, for example: *"they [practitioners] asked me what I wanted to do to 'make it right' so I can get on with my life"*. However many of the children interviewed for this study could not remember even having an intervention plan, let alone knowing what was agreed or having a sense that they were involved in the decision-making process. This concurs with the practice realities found by Creaney (2020) who concluded that this kind of planning was 'not necessarily a collaborative or a shared endeavour' (p. 34) with the YJS tending to impose its own agenda and intervention plans that by definition, therefore, did not prioritise children's wishes, individual wants and needs. It seems, therefore, that change is still needed in the attitudes of those responsible for intervention planning towards better understanding of what is likely to lead to success (defined through Child First as being a child developing pro-socially, and therefore, away from re-offending), which this study shows to be the child-centric focus of their own life trajectory. However, intervention plans can only be created (according to what children told us they wanted/needed) if they follow frank collaborative child-practitioner conversations about a child's life aspirations, with the plan then seeking to facilitate part of that journey.

Experiences of collaboration with children in custody about intervention planning

Whilst for YJS practitioners, as the above quote indicates, there were some positive experiences of collaboration with children in planning for community-based interventions, our findings were not so positive for children in custody, where children reported a much more mixed picture from different custodial settings. They expressed uncertainty about their involvement and influence in decisions

Children said that institutions were mainly focused on internal issues such as behaviour, incentives and daily regimes within the site (contrary to good resettlement practice where all in-custody activity and planning is focused on *post*-release; Hazel, 2022).

relating to activity planning and about what they wanted to achieve whilst incarcerated, as part of resettlement and/or after release. Children said that institutions were mainly focused on internal issues such as behaviour, incentives and daily regimes within the site (contrary to good resettlement practice where all in-custody activity and planning is focused on *post*-release; Hazel, 2022). Child-practitioner collaboration for planning should not focus on custody, but instead needs to fully involve children in the setting of their own goals (Wright at al., 2014), beginning immediately on their admission into custody, taking a long-term approach (HMIP, updated 2024), and should 'reflect their goals, strengths and interests' (Hazel and Bateman, 2021, p. 85). Children's plans therefore need to be focused on supporting them to achieve their own goals, but this was not reflected consistently across the secure estate in the findings of this study.

Notwithstanding the above finding, children still expressed that they had their *"own plans for the future"* and wanted to use their time wisely by focusing on education, achieving GCSEs and improving their chances of success and employment on release into the community; but often regimes made this impossible through educational provision lacking in breadth, depth and relevance to the child's aspirations. As an illustration, one child explained: "*I go to English right, but it's a bit stupid as I got my English GCSE so I don't see why I need to go to low level English like what I was doing at primary school"*. This finding echoes other research and literature in this area, especially the Constructive Resettlement model of working with children given custodial sentences, which promotes collaborative working with children in custody to build on their strengths and goals to encourage prosocial development, which will naturally then draw children away from offending (Hazel, 2022; Case, 2023). Hazel and Bateman (2021) reassert that all work should always be co-created, with children's engagement and active involvement a pre-requisite for this pro-social identity development and effective resettlement after custody, so it is disappointing to find that issues persist in practice with children.

ii.   *Hear and support children's stated aspirations*

Another aspect of the child-centred collaboration objective relating to the children's life plans directly leads from the previous sub-theme of asking them what they would like to achieve, that is, *youth justice agencies listening to and positively supporting them* with their stated aspirations, which would facilitate more successful outcomes leading to an offence-free future. Children spoke about being supported by YJS practitioners with their career aspirations, encouraged to pursue positive pursuits and plans which enhanced their own individual development that "*really helped me turn my life around with their help … They've put a lot of confidence back in myself*". This finding seemed to relate mainly to children's community YJS supervision. It would be concerning for the consistent experience of collaborative practice throughout the system if this were not being applied by every agency and at every youth justice stage (from caution to post-custody).

> **…a theme throughout our participant conversations was that in other justice agencies (e.g., police, courts, solicitors); there does indeed appear to be an understanding and application gap for the tenets of Child First justice, and collaboration in particular, with perceptions of overwhelming power imbalances potentially scuppering its adoption across the whole system**.

Unfortunately, a theme throughout our participant conversations was that in other justice agencies (e.g., police, courts, solicitors[7]); there does indeed appear to be an understanding and application gap for the tenets of Child First justice, and collaboration in particular, with perceptions of overwhelming power imbalances potentially scuppering its adoption across the whole system.

Children's stated life aspirations needing to be supported through their youth justice contact builds on and strengthens the findings presented in the Child First evidence-base report (Case and Browning, 2021), which emphasised the importance of individual bespoke planning relevant to each child, requiring effective collaboration between children and practitioners to meaningfully reflect their needs and facilitate them to achieve their goals. Moreover, it shows how the 'collaboration' tenet foundationally supports the facilitation of the first two Child First tenets by prioritising the best interests of children and recognising their unique needs, capacities, rights and potential (tenet 1); and building pro-social identity, promoting children's individual strengths and capacities to develop their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance (tenet 2). Therefore, our study suggests that collaboration with children is as a key driver to achieving full implementation of Child First practice across the *whole* Youth Justice System and all its associated agencies.

The principle of hearing and actively supporting children's stated aspirations again mirrors the evidence-based 'Constructive Resettlement' framework (YJB, 2018), which aligns with the Child First principle of promoting collaboration with children in custody, including the issues raised above to support children to achieve positive outcomes in the future. The Constructive Resettlement model's related theory of change sees this being achieved through the provision of fresh AIR (Activities, Interactions, Roles; Hazel, 2022), which should constitute the foci for any resettlement (or intervention) plan. The provision of appropriate and relevant opportunities for fresh AIR must be based on children's responses to questions such as 'Who do I want to be' and 'How am I going to get there' (YJB/MoJ, 2024), extends the relevance of this model for all justice-involved children (who all need fresh AIR), and chimes with our finding of the importance of identifying children's own life aspirations.

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[7] see pages 35, 36, 37, 41, 48, 49, 50, 53, 54 and 58 for previous discussions

iii.   Help children to look forward and get on with their lives

The RQ2 sub-theme of the desire children voiced that the focus of youth justice interventions is on facilitating them to "*get on with the rest of my life*" and to be forwards-focused, interconnects with the previous two about collaboration objectives. Children wanted to be *asked* about their *plans and goals for their life*, *heard* and *supported* by youth justice agencies towards where they want to be by *relevant* intervention planning, and then to be able to close this chapter of their life so they can *move on* (which reflects with the positive, future-focused nature of Child First interventions, in comparison to previous deficit- and offence-focused working; Case and Hampson, 2019). This also relates to encouraging a child to see themselves differently and therefore act differently – difficult if drawn back to an offence, sometimes committed long ago, through an ensuing deficit-focused intervention, which is also where system-damage of children starts to begin (McVie and McAra, 2007; Haines and Case, 2015). Children wanted their youth justice experience to be forward-focused, helping them to see their future as *non*-offending ("*I don't want to go back to offending*"), which also relates again to the theory of change (fresh AIR) posited by Hazel (2022), enabling children to develop pro-socially by seeing themselves in a variety of positive roles in life, naturally leading to desistance from crime (Hazel and Case, 2024).

These responses from study participants around the importance of positive future-focused working based on their very specific needs and life goals (which requires the development of meaningful child-practitioner relationships to facilitate collaboration) echoes previous literature in this area. For example, Taylor's (2016) review of the Youth Justice System in England and Wales emphasised the importance of maintaining a future-focus, whilst asserting the centrality of education to that aim. Additionally, the 'Standards for Children in the Youth Justice System' strategy document (YJB 2019), in adopting Child First, states that all youth justice work should be 'constructive and future focused' at all stages of the Youth Justice System (YJB, 2019, p. 6). Hazel et al., (2017; Hazel, 2022) reaffirmed this stance in the future-oriented, strengths-based, and empowering framework for Constructive Resettlement based on the concept of prosocial identity development, with *all work* promoting this. Children wanting to get on with their life and looking towards the future builds on insight from previous research by Hampson (2016) and the Beyond Youth Custody project again (Hazel et al., 2022). Therefore, findings from this study demonstrate how children's own perceptions of the objectives of collaboration chimes with and builds specifically on the Child First evidence-base (Case and Browning, 2021).

RQ2 Conclusions: Collaboration Objectives

The findings consolidate knowledge, but from a child's perspective, and reaffirm the Child First principle more generally (notably the third 'collaboration' tenet, but with that acting as a conduit for all other Child First working), emphasising that identifying child-centric objectives of collaboration with children (discussed above) enables them to engage in activities that promote positive pro-social identity development, and which are forward-focused to build their future (tenet 2 of Child First). The findings have provided an in-depth understanding of *children's* understandings of what collaboration should be aiming to achieve and why it is important for youth justice plans to be focused on *these* priorities, instead of adult-centric pre-conceived, deficit-focused offending behaviour programmes. However, achieving more creative and child-centred

approaches may be difficult for practitioners working in a youth justice culture where they still feel that risk assessment/management and 'defensible decision-making' should be a central part of their work with children, rather than anything the child might want to achieve (Hampson, 2023; Case et al., 2020; Day, 2023). To overcome these challenges, it may be helpful to refer back to the 'collaboration' definition (on page 10) for professionals to consider how they can utilise the complementary elements of different stages for their practice, building their knowledge and confidence of each level to achieve collaboration objectives.

RQ3: Collaboration Effectiveness

This research question looked at: How do children perceive and experience 'effective' practice in collaboration, such as the effectiveness of processes and how collaboration outcomes should be measured?

The current literature and research about youth justice 'collaboration effectiveness' is somewhat sparce, with the focus more usually on the different *elements* of collaboration (as outlined previously in the definition on page 10 of this report of engagement, participation, co-production and co-creation). As part of 'The Child First Implementation Project – Translating Strategy into Practice', Case et al., (2023) found that the evidence-base for full Child First effectiveness generally was currently 'a work in progress' which also includes the 'collaboration' tenet. Professionals who were consulted as part of that previous Child First project were enthusiastic to learn what factors and processes might constitute Child First effective practice through the provision of exemplars and knowledge exchange, which this current project will produce in a practitioner pack to help facilitate this third tenet of 'collaboration with children'. As previously highlighted, other scholars (e.g., Smithson et al., 2021; Burns and Creaney, 2023; Day et al., 2023; Kilkelly, 2023) have written about the 'benefits' of participatory opportunities and co-production (and for whom acknowledging inadequate participation can cause more harm than good), with aspects of the themes they identified relating to findings from this project about effective collaboration practice (which will be discussed further below). Additionally, Smith (2014, p. 65) suggested bringing together the principles of welfare and rights models of youth justice and presented the objectives of such a model to include social inclusion and participation which was significant at the time as it offered an alternative to assumptions about both the basis and content of interventions to address children's offending behaviour. However, it is important to note that the findings from this study have provided further insight about collaboration effectiveness, from children's perspectives of what they consider to be good practice from agencies across the Youth Justice System.

Since the YJB specified Child First as their guiding principle, they have published a raft of revised guidance: 'A Guide to Child First' (2022), updated standards (2019), and case management guidance (2024) for working with children in the Youth Justice System, all based on research-backed evidence to promote best practice (although a lack of referencing makes the sources unclear), including collaboration with children. The guidance includes practice advice about engaging with children, building positive relationships and encouraging children to participate in the development of their support plan. Alongside these documents, the YJB maintains a Youth Justice Resource Hub which includes some of the latest evidence and operational practice to support effective working with children, including a 'participation' section and several Child First pathfinder projects that were

co-produced with justice-involved children. Findings from this study about what constitutes effective collaboration practice, consolidates and further develops the literature and previous findings (e.g., Peer Power/YJB, 2021; Wainwright et al., 2021; Smithson and Gray, 2021; Fullerton et al., 2021), encompassing relationship-based practice, neutralised power dynamics and whether children *choose* to engage in collaborative practice.

For this project, RQ3 explored how children perceive and experience 'effective' collaboration, such as how they were involved in conversations about the work and activities they undertook and how they contributed to decisions about what was included on their intervention and support plans. Additionally, conversations with the participant children explored what they thought about the activities they participated in and whether or not they considered them to have been successful. Three main themes (with contributory sub-themes) were developed which were:

1. Positive relationships between children and professionals including professionals who 'care'

2. Counteracting power-dynamics, including power play and environmental factors: enablers and barriers

3. Developing effective interventions and support together including choice and contribution to decisions, children's views making a difference, and inconsistencies across the Youth Justice System

> **…children's views indicated that effective collaboration practice needs to be based around building authentic, positive, non-hierarchical relationships with professionals who cared about them, in a comfortable environment, to facilitate the development of effective and relevant support.**

In summary, children's views indicated that effective collaboration practice needs to be based around building authentic, positive, non-hierarchical relationships with professionals who cared about them, in a comfortable environment, to facilitate the development of effective and relevant support.

1. Relationships between children and professionals need to be positive

The interview participants from this research felt that developing positive relationships with youth justice professionals contributed to effective collaboration practice by enabling them to openly discuss and agree intervention work and support together. Children revealed that when professionals were authentic and displayed genuine empathy it helped to build mutual trust and respect enabling them to 'open up' and talk about their feelings. The importance of developing positive child-professional relationships has been documented in literature and research previously and found to be a central factor for effective engagement and collaboration practice. For example, Case et al. (2023) found that youth justice stakeholders'

understanding of Child First practice often focussed on engagement, effective communicating and collaborating with children, respecting children's knowledge and building trusting relationships. Additionally, Creaney (2020) asserted the need for a commitment to promoting relationship-based practice, highlighting its crucial role in facilitating participation and engagement of children and enabling practitioners to understand children's circumstances, needs and support requirements. Furthermore, trusting and reciprocal child-practitioner partnerships were espoused as an active vehicle for change and core component of effective practice to progress *positive* practice intervention and relationship-based supervision which would help to address structural inequalities and promoted pathways to desistance (Burns and Creaney, 2023). Wigzell (2020) noted that children face a multitude of adversity in their day-to-day environment that negatively impacts their ability to engage in supervisory relationships with professionals. However, she concluded that supervisory relationships can be characterised in two ways: 'the human nature of their boundaries' (p. 317) that necessitates professional engagement going beyond a merely supervisory role, and 'reciprocity', based on care and communication, which suggests mutual recognition and sharing to foster the fulfilling of children's goals. This last point leads fittingly onto this section's sub-theme of 'professionals who care' in this study's findings.

i. Professionals need to care

When participants from this study spoke about positive relationships, a reoccurring related theme expressed by children was that they wanted the professionals they worked with to genuinely '*care*' about them because they were passionate about supporting children, illustrated in this example from a child being supported by a YJS: "*He is one of those people who does actually care, he's not like I have to do this cos it's his job*". Children understood the importance of building trust to enable them to work constructively with professionals, and that it takes time to achieve this. This echoes the findings of the Peer Power/YJB project (2021) where practitioners understood that 'good participation' should feature genuine commitment, showing an interest, and listening to children in order to build trusting and caring relationships with children. Additionally, Fullerton et al. (2021) identified some crucial traits and intangible qualities involved in developing effective working relationships between youth justice workers and children such as dependability, consistency, respect, warmth, humour and a commitment to helping children. They stated that a combination of these skills and qualities helps to establish mutual trust essential for securing and sustaining relationships, which also reflects the findings from this study for the foundations of effective collaboration practice, as perceived by children.

The importance of caring relationships is a relatively new concept in youth justice, with Byrne and Case (2016, p. 76) commenting that processes for administering justice to children were failing to deliver a context to encourage the 'demonstration of care' needed for effective relationships to successfully develop. The children interviewed during this project wholeheartedly felt that 'professionals who care' were vital to fostering the kind of relationships required for effective collaboration to be possible. Looking forward, youth justice practice may benefit from Purcell's (2024) youth work study, which also emphasised the importance of caring and nurturing relationship-based practice incorporating 'professional love' as a defining aspect of effective

practice with children, asserting that 'professionally loving practice is the radical enactment of our ethic of care, offering young people a glimpse of the positive aspects of our mutually dependent humanity' (p.158).

2. Power dynamics should be recognised and imbalances countered

The impact of unequal power dynamics featured significantly in the findings of this project during interviews with children discussing collaboration effectiveness and their involvement in decision-making processes across the different stages of the Youth Justice System. Literature and previous research often highlights the potential of genuine collaboration to *break down* power inequalities between professionals and children (e.g., Smithson and Jones, 2021; Case and Creaney, 2021; Burns and Creaney, 2023; Hampson et al., 2024). Promoting principles of inclusion and social justice is key to embedding a collaborative power-sharing process between justice-involved children and practitioners through challenging adult-centric narratives of needing control, and children's lack of autonomy and agency (Smithson et al., 2021). Unfortunately, some risk-centric processes appear to remain 'steadfastly punitive' (Deakin et al., 2022, p. 101), prioritising professional power which prevents partnership working and true reciprocity with children. Power differentials can be challenged when professionals demonstrate trust in children's voices (Case et al., 2020) and value their expertise by experience (Creaney, 2020) throughout *all* stages of Youth Justice System contact. This theme relating to power dynamics can be understood in terms of the power play which adults use to maintain control and those aspects of the youth justice environment which either enable or prevent the issues caused by this, to which the discussion now turns.

i. Power play

Building non-hierarchical relationships involves active, conscious, ongoing effort to breakdown power inequalities (Burns, 2019; Creaney and Case, 2021), which also assumes that power dynamics are recognised and acknowledged by the *adults* in relationships across the Youth Justice System(and all of its composite agencies), and that neutralising these is a desirable project…

Participants of this study continually expressed their perception that adult professionals deliberately used their elevated power status (as an adult over them as the child), impacting their ability to speak, and therefore threatening the impact their voice could have over decisions affecting them. Power imbalance was most prominent in interactions with police officers and judges/magistrates, sometimes seeming in itself to *cause* children's non-engagement. The following extract from a child in custody referred to a police officer when he was being arrested:

"*I've had bad experiences with abuse … Just follow their orders and don't say anything to them*". This builds on the work of Smithson and Jones (2021) who recognised that the most significant challenge of 'participation' (their term) was addressing the inherent imbalanced power dynamics between justice-involved children and

the professionals with whom they come into contact, including police, courts staff and youth justice practitioners. Moreover, it consolidates Burns and Creaney's (2023) plea for equal power-sharing between justice-involved children and professionals, whilst also recognising the reality that relationship-based practice and unequal power is still a barrier to be overcome in youth justice. Unfortunately, our findings demonstrate that the power issues identified a decade and a half ago by Botley et al. (2010) are still evident today. Building non-hierarchical relationships involves active, conscious, ongoing effort to breakdown power inequalities (Burns, 2019; Creaney and Case, 2021), which also assumes that power dynamics are recognised and acknowledged by the *adults* in relationships across the Youth Justice System (and all of its composite agencies), and that neutralising these is a desirable project; however, this still appears to be absent, according to the findings of this study.

ii.   *Environment: enablers and barriers*

Children who were interviewed for this research wanted a welcoming and relaxed environment, both in terms of physical spaces and ambiance, which would enable them to better engage with the development of collaborative working relationships. This point interconnects with a previous point concerning the importance of professionals having positive interpersonal skills which act to encourage children to feel comfortable, enabling effective collaboration to construct relevant support and interventions. Whilst one of the YOIs involved in the fieldwork of this study stood out for its 'calm' and 'chilled' atmosphere, children were quick to criticise 'boring' meeting rooms used for YJS appointments, expressing that they would prefer a more child-friendly environment. Children also commented on the need for a good atmosphere, with one child referring to a "*nice vibe*" which encouraged his engagement in working with the YJS. These findings build on previous studies, including Cross (2021), who identified 'feeling comfortable' as a crucial characteristic of 'good quality' child-professional working relationships, creating an atmosphere of respect, openness, non-judgement and a feeling of being understood. Additionally, this finding reaffirms Lundy's model of participation (2007), asserting that providing a safe and inclusive space for children and young people to express their views is a prerequisite for engaging children in decision-making but bringing it into the youth justice space. Burns and Creaney's (2023) stance in espousing the importance of professionals creating a warm and welcoming environment free from judgement also chimes with this, all demonstrating the importance of embracing approaches that build confidence and self-esteem to facilitate children's involvement in collaboration.

Research participants were highly critical of police cells, court buildings and the other custody settings, emphasising the negative impact of environmental barriers on opportunities for collaboration and on children's ability to influence decisions affecting them. Children deemed these environments to be inappropriate and intimidating, leaving them feeling powerless about their circumstances, as illustrated through this child's impressions of his court experience: "*the pressure in there [court] is bad, so it makes you not want to say anything, because it's so stressful*". Lambie and Randell (2019) came to the same conclusion about the structured youth custodial environment, emphasising the counterproductive impact on children's ability to make wise choices when opportunities to be involved in decision-making are removed. 'Courts' and 'Policing' both feature in the YJB Business Plan (2023-2024) as areas needing improvement in order to become

fully aligned with Child First and in operationalising the tenet of 'collaboration', despite the National Strategy for Policing Children and Young People (NPCC, 2015), which appears to have had little impact. It made no mention of the police station/cell environment, which was also ignored by the policy update (ACPO, 2024), so it would appear to be an under-developed area to which this project has drawn particular attention, which needs to be addressed if children are to be enabled to engage with opportunities to collaborate in this important aspect of children's youth justice experience. The NPCC has recently published its updated Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy 2024 – 2027 with its vision 'to create a culture of Child Centred Policing across the whole of policing in England and Wales' (NPCC, 2024, p. 4), whereas the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) has also recently introduced their 'Child First' policing policy (2024). Neither documents make mention of appropriate environments for children, apart from acknowledging that 'detention rooms' should be used rather than 'cells' (MPS, 2024, p. 34). The MPS Strategy purports to be Child First and emphasises that 'The voices of children must be heard and their opinions respected' (MPS, 2024, p. 10), however, does not include an appreciation of the complete nature of the 'collaboration' Child First tenet, which, as demonstrated by this research, needs to go much further than simply hearing and respecting. Whilst the NPCC's new Strategy goes further committing to its 'Child Centred Principles of 'lawful', 'effective' and 'fair' and 'works collaboratively to understand each person's individual abilities, strengths and circumstances' (NPCC, 2024, p. 6). Furthermore, it espouses that children's voices are heard across policing both strategically and locally, involving them in decision-making processes and responding appropriately by taking tangible action or explaining why it has not (ibid., p. 8). Both strategies show a promising trajectory of development in principle, however, only time will tell if these new strategies have any impact on children's actual collaboration experiences of policing going forward.

This lack of acknowledgement of the importance of environment in facilitating collaboration (and because effective collaboration helps to facilitate the other Child First tenets, the whole of Child First) by the police is by no means isolated, as there is little consideration of environment in the Child First literature more generally (Case and Browning, 2021; Creaney and Case, 2022; Smithson et al., 2023; Day, 2023), although the newly opened Secure School has clearly given serious thought to ensuring that its whole environment is child appropriate (UK Government, 2024). However, given that children have highlighted this as an issue for them, the question arises – what is a Child First environment? It is more than just putting child-focused posters on a wall, as furniture arrangements and room set-ups have already been found in other contexts to be able to either maintain power differentials, or mitigate them (see, for example, Bybee, 2012; Dudek and Stępień, 2021). Therefore a Child First environment is one which is attractive (to children), comfortable, and actively works to equalise power

> **… a Child First environment is one which is attractive (to children), comfortable, and actively works to equalise power dynamics among those in the room which, as already discussed, is vital for children to be able to actively take up opportunities to meaningfully collaborate.**

dynamics among those in the room which, as already discussed, is vital for children to be able to actively take up opportunities to meaningfully collaborate. This needs to apply to all youth justice spaces, if Child First is to be fully operationalised throughout the system, including youth justice service meeting rooms (and foyers), courtrooms (and waiting spaces), police 'detention rooms' and cells, custodial institutions of all types and solicitors' offices. Consideration of what a Child First environment should look like could be a useful avenue for further research *with* children, to ensure a child-centric approach and avoid the pitfalls of what adults *think* children might like and respond to.

3. Interventions and support should be developed together through collaboration

Children participating in this study felt that *developing interventions and support together* was an essential aspect of *effective* collaboration practice as it was important in defining what worked or not from their perspectives. They reported positive experiences about participating in decisions with YJS practitioners about individual and forward focused activities. This is an encouraging finding for the development of co-production in youth justice intervention planning, as previous literature has identified the authoritarian professional exerting unilateral power, including applying sanctions for non-compliance, thus continuing children's powerlessness in decision-making and in their ability to exert influence over intervention development (Burns and Creaney, 2023). This finding builds on previous literature which asserts that children's engagement and involvement in co-creation is pivotal to effective planning, intervention and supervision to sustain positive outcomes (Hazel et al., 2017).

i. Choice and contribution to decisions

For the child participants in this study, having a choice of activities and the freedom to choose was considered important, with a good range of activities generally on offer to meet varying interests; for example, choice within reparation activities: "*the hours you have to do for your order, we discuss it, there are some choices, stuff you might want to do, not just boring things*". Conversely, some children stated they had no choice, rather being told what they had to do on their order, or choice being limited to deciding whether or not they wanted to engage in a particular activity. This finding builds on previous literature and research, for example, 'choice' on whether/how children collaborate is an element in Thomas' Climbing Wall of Participation (2002), which is reflected to some extent in the findings from this study, but does not address the importance of having a range of activities from which to choose. Similarly, children having the right to make their own choices is one of the principles in the 'Participatory Youth Practice Framework' (Smithson et al., 2020) which stresses the need for professionals to recognise that children may take time to decide whether or not to participate (recognising past/current trauma) and need to offer ongoing appropriate support to facilitate their safe involvement (see also Burns and Creaney, 2023). The finding of having limited activity choice echoes previous research conducted in a custodial setting, which found that children some children had restricted educational options available to them and choice was particularly constrained if participants had already attained GCSEs and for children assigned anything other than a low risk level. The project concluded that children should play

a part in determining activities and trusting them to play a part in decision-making in order to support improved education and social experiences. (Case et al., 2020, p. 12).

ii. Children's views making a difference

Children interviewed for this study felt that for collaboration to be effective, their views needed to make a difference to what subsequently happened to them. However, children reported differences between YJSs and custodial settings, stating that they felt that their voices did not always result in action, as illustrated by this child who was in custody: "*just because they ask us about things doesn't mean anything will get done*". This finding mirrors the Peer Power/YJB study (2021), that there was uncertainty concerning the extent to which children's voices influenced decision-making, with dangers that the process could become tokenistic and undervalued if their participation results in little or no change, increasing frustration and disengagement. Additionally, Lefevre (2018) stated the importance of children's views making a difference in social work and what constitutes effective engagement and communication needed by professionals to give a clear message to children that their views are being considered seriously and their concerns are acted upon, giving confidence they have been *heard* and that their experiences matter. Being *asked* with no discernible change in outcome (or feedback on actions taken/not taken) could compound feelings of frustration at the system, actually making the situation worse, which relates back to a previous discussion on the importance of closing the feedback loop (see p. 62), ensuring transparency on the impact of children's views on decision-making.

iii. Inconsistencies across the Youth Justice System

Interviewees disclosed inconsistent effective collaboration practice across the different aspects and agencies of the Youth Justice System, highlighting discrepancies between custodial settings, the police service, courts and children's social care. Whilst children were mostly positive about YJS collaboration practice, for those in custody perceptions and experiences were mixed depending on custodial setting (and their level within the internal behaviour scheme); in relation to the police, many barriers to effective collaboration were identified; concerning the courts and children's services, children expressed mostly negative views of collaboration and joint decision-making. Differences across the Youth Justice System are presented in detail the in 'summary of findings' section of this report and included in relevant discussions in this section.[8]

RQ3 Conclusions: Effective Collaboration Practice

Findings for RQ3 have consolidated knowledge from previous literature and research about the importance of relationship-based practice and the tensions of power within their interactions with professionals that children themselves have identified as barriers to collaboration in practice, but developed further understandings on the importance of environment on effective collaboration facilitation, in all agencies of the Youth Justice System, towards consideration of what a Child First environment should be like. As well as physical

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[8] There is a need to further investigate the barriers (actual or perceived, legitimate or not) to the (further) adoption of the Child First framework and practice across different youth justice agencies and processes – see recommendation 13.

environments, there is further work needed to change cultures and mindsets across the youth justice sector. Whilst there has been conceptual (Hampson, et al., 2024) and theoretical (Creaney and Burns, 2024) analyses of the balance of power in child/professional relationships, this study is the first to present *contemporary* empirical insights directly from justice-involved children across the youth justice sector including custody. Children expressed their desire for youth justice agencies to employ staff who care about them and their future, whilst also stating their desire to be involved in decisions that affect them and part of intervention planning with interesting options offered as a choice. The findings have identified *in*consistent collaboration practice across the Youth Justice System, identifying the need for professionals in all related agencies to ask children for their opinions, authentically listen to the voice of the child, act on their concerns and include their preferred options where possible, and communicate to children what difference their input has made.

RQ4: Developing Collaboration Practice

This research question looked at: What is the extent and nature of 'Child First' collaboration practice and decision-making processes across youth justice agencies and, based on children's experience, and how could these be improved?

The findings for RQ4 build on the limited research literature regarding children's collaboration in youth justice decision-making and judgements of practice 'effectiveness' discussed in the other RQ sections, then developing these findings into a series of implications and recommendations for improving collaboration practice as a facilitator for Child First practice system-wide.

The current YJB Strategic Plan for delivering positive outcomes for children by reducing offending and creating safer communities (YJB, 2024, p. 13), restates their continued commitment to supporting and influencing policy development Youth Justice System according to Child First justice. The YJB has committed to reviewing the standards for youth justice by incorporating the latest evidence and developing measures of positive child outcomes, so the findings from this study is a good addition to the work already begun on this. Additionally, the recent HMIP Annual Report for Youth Justice Services (HMIP, 2024) includes a section on 'participation' implementation, acknowledging that participation, collaboration and co-production continue to be a priority for many YJSs, identified in partnership and service plans where there was evidence of 'highly impressive work in several' (p. 16), including processes to capture children's voices. Findings from this project about effective collaboration

Findings from this project about effective collaboration practice and identified areas for development provide further insight from children's perspectives that could also be used for developing inspection standards to improve engagement with this Child First tenet.

practice and identified areas for development provide further insight from children's perspectives that could also be used for developing inspection standards to improve engagement with this Child First tenet. Moreover, findings and areas for development relating to the secure estate could support the Youth Custody Service aim of 'bringing the child voice into service design and to learning from latest research and best practice' (Youth Custody Service (YCS), 2024). For example, ensuring children are meaningfully involved in developing any new YCS strategies, reviews and recruitment processes, and providing all public sector secure estate staff with Child First training. Furthermore, areas for development provide new evidence of effective collaboration practice that could be helpful for a wide variety of professionals working with children across the whole of the Youth Justice System. Although focusing on 'effective' collaboration practice, RQ4 predominantly captured children's perceptions and experiences of *in*effective collaboration practice, notably barriers to children being involved in decision-making processes and suggestions that children identified for further development or change. Two main themes (with contributary sub-themes) were identified:

1. Listen to and understand children - utilise children's ideas for practice improvement, recognise and counteract power-dynamics, create child-friendly environments, keep children informed

2. Involve children in decision-making about matters affecting them, for example, at the strategic level (e.g. business planning and recruiting caring professionals) and the practice level (e.g., ensuring that plans prioritise and support children's own goals and utilising justice-experienced mentors to support collaboration with children

In summary, children identified the main areas for practice development which they believed would improve Child First practice as: wanting professionals to listen to them and their ideas for improvement, recognising and breaking down power imbalances by creating child-friendly environments, and keeping them continually informed. Furthermore, they identified improvements at both strategic and practice levels that they thought would benefit their experience and outcomes across the whole of the Youth Justice System.

1. Listen to and understand children

Children suggested many ideas for practice improvements to better embed collaboration into practice and encourage active engagement, specifically in relation to understanding and listening to children more and ensuring that their ideas influence decisions about matters affecting them within all youth justice agencies. Children's responses for improvement in this area were particularly relevant to the police service, courts, children's social care services and two of the custodial establishments. As mentioned previously in this report, many justice-involved children have experienced difficult experiences, such as trauma, family pressures, mental health problems, discrimination, speech and language difficulties and neurodivergence. Professionals working in the Youth Justice System need to fully understand these individual differences and vulnerabilities with empathy as a foundation to enabling effective collaboration with children, so that such potentially disadvantaging issues are recognised and properly supported.

i. Utilise children's ideas for practice improvement

> *Policing:* **children's experiences on the ground do not mirror the well-intentioned strategic visionary documents… more guidance and training for police officers is needed to develop meaningful collaboration with children.**

Policing: Children interviewed for this study shared development and improvement ideas that they perceived would support effective collaboration, including police training and employing a more diverse workforce better reflecting the community and the children with whom they are working. This is illustrated by one child who explained, "*they need to understand children more … because not everyone's brains are the same*", and another (with a mixed heritage background) who highlighted "*they make mistakes all the time, they need to transfer some police or do some [diversity] training*". The National Strategy for the Policing of Children and Youth People (NPCC, 2015) stated that police services need to work closely with youth justice partners to improve their understanding of children and of what works well to engage and forge positive interactions with children, so they can break down barriers and build better relationships with children to improve trust and confidence. Moreover, The Policing Vision 2030 (ACPO/College of Policing/NPCC, 2024, p. 2) aspires to be a 'representative and inclusive workforce' which builds on their 2025 vision of striving to be more reflective of their communities (ACPO/NPCC, 2016). The findings from this study suggest that children's experiences on the ground do not mirror the well-intentioned strategic visionary documents, and that more guidance and training for police officers is needed to develop meaningful collaboration with children.

Providing additional support in the community to avoid custodial sentences: Children in custodial settings suggested that they could be better supported in the community, rather than being given a prison sentence, but were not included in any discussions and decisions in court about what should happen to them. Children remarked on the negative impact to their wellbeing of being in custody, including loss of contact with family members and community support agencies, whilst also highlighting the financial cost of imprisonment and arguing that money could be better spent on robust community support. These findings indicates that the guidance offered in both the current and previous Youth Court Bench Books (2023; 2024, p. 2), which state that children should 'play a vital role in the proceedings and, as such, should be

> **Courts: … the guidance offered in both the current and previous Youth Court Bench Books (2023; 2024, p. 2), which state that children should 'play a vital role in the proceedings and, as such, should be involved at all stages', is not currently being realised.**

involved at all stages', is not currently being realised. The guidance acknowledges that children may be reluctant to speak due to lack of maturity, embarrassment or nerves; however, there is no recognition of the power imbalance between children and judicial professionals, or any indication as to how this could be addressed (discussed further below).

Offering appropriate education support in custody to help children to achieve their own aspirations: As highlighted under RQ2, children's goals mostly focused on their future, and in particular on education and training, but there appeared to be a lack of appropriate provision to meet children's expressed aspirations and needs; this was noticeably an issue in custodial settings. One suggestion put forward by a respondent was for custodial institutions to develop partnerships and collaborate with local colleges to develop more suitable courses for the children in their care. This finding builds on previous literature and research highlighting the importance of listening to children in prison about their experiences of education to find out what needs to be improved, as provision often does not seem to meet their education and learning needs (Little, 2015). Additionally, this finding reflects proposals made in the Taylor 'Review of the Youth Justice System' report (Taylor, 2016) for YOIs to forge closer links between schools and colleges and utilise expertise from the best alternative provision schools to 'equip children with the skills, qualifications and confidence to move beyond offending and fulfil their potential' (ibid., p. 4). Furthermore, it ties back to previous discussion points in this report about 'Constructive Resettlement' (e.g., YJB 2018; Hazel 2022), which demonstrates that promoting collaboration with children in custody is a crucial aspect of Child First working and acts as a facilitator of the other tenets.

ii. Recognise and counteract power-dynamics

Power dynamics and deliberate 'power play' used by professionals to maintain control over children were prominent issues from the findings of this study, and identified as barriers to effective collaboration by children. Normalising routine conversations that acknowledge and negotiate power within individual relationships (Peer Power/YJB, 2021) should be embedded within youth justice practice to build non-hierarchical interactions and collaboration with children. The Youth Court Handbook (2024) promotes a less formal courtroom layout compared to adult sittings, stating that magistrates should sit on the same level as other people present and parents/guardians should be able to sit next to children as an attempt to counteract power imbalances. However, the guidance does not make reference to other areas in the court building such as waiting areas, and does not specifically address issues of comfort, which children felt was important to facilitate collaboration (see next section). Despite this guidance, (also included in the previous Court Handbook, 2023) children in this study reported the negative impact on their ability to influence decision-making, therefore indicating it still as an area for improvement. Power dynamics were discussed in detail under RQ3, which consolidates and builds on previous literature and research highlighting the benefits of actively breaking down power inequalities to facilitate effective collaboration (e.g., Smithson and Jones, 2021; Case and Creaney, 2021; Burns and Creaney, 2023; Hampson et al., 2024).

iii. Create child-friendly environments

Child-friendly environments which prioritised children's comfort and were appropriate in all aspects (comfortable furniture arranged to neutralise power dynamics, attractive child-friendly décor, using outdoor spaces, contact visits taking place in non-official spaces like cafes) were identified as key for enabling engagement, relationship-building, and therefore effective collaboration working between children and professionals, the enablers and barriers of which were discussed in detail under RQ3. In summary children wanted a welcoming, '*chilled*' and '*calm*' atmosphere to facilitate their interactions, linked to enabling the development of positive child-professional relationships, instead of '*boring*' YJS meetings rooms and inappropriate and intimidating court building sand custody settings. This study has highlighted a lack of acknowledgement of the importance that environments (both in terms of the physical space and atmosphere that is thus created) play in facilitating effective collaboration; however, some youth justice agencies are beginning to recognise the need for improving spaces in buildings used for youth justice work with children. For example, the HMIP Annual Report (HMIP 2024, p. 17) highlighted developing practice in this area, noting that children's views in one area had informed improvements to the YJS office which included creating a girls' room, with a range of changes made, including choosing the colour scheme for intervention rooms and the outside railings cover, and suggestions for facilities and activities (including a punch bag, breakfast bar, and a table tennis table). However, this example was provided to highlight good 'participation' rather than the benefits of a comfortable *environment* co-created with children. Another example of innovative environment development was a new police custody suite in the North-East that was specifically designed to support children separately from the adult custody area, having its own entry point, reception area, small exercise

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space and being decorated with artwork based on designs created by children (Cleveland Police, 2024). These examples are encouraging, however, there is a need for child-friendly environments to be developed more widely (avoiding tokenistic gestures) as well as a potential area for further research to ensure that child-centric rather than adult-assumed changes are made to specifically make them *Child First* spaces.

iv. Keep children informed

Keeping children fully informed about what was happening to them was found to be crucial to developing collaboration with children for decision-making processes, with children suggesting practice improvements in two ways. Firstly, children reported that being given clear information in child-friendly language was important to enabling them to understand what they were collaborating in. Secondly, two-way communication is vital to

close the feedback loop to ensure that children could see the difference their input had made, thus acknowledging that their views had been considered. Further, this could ensure that suggestions which were not implemented were properly explained, so children could understand why their idea was perhaps not practical, and thereby reduce the likelihood of frustration that a half-developed collaboration attempt might bring. It is vital that communication channels and collaboration opportunities remain open, acknowledging further discussions about changing circumstances as appropriate and enabling children to contribute their views throughout their involvement with youth justice services. This finding was discussed in detail under RQ1, where previous literature and research has highlighted accessible formats, age appropriateness, the need for continually updating information throughout children's involvement with YJSs, recognition of children's individual communication needs, using words that children understand and the need for adults to check back with children that they have actually understood the information being provided so they know what is happening them (e.g., Stalford et al., 2017; Case and Browning, 2021). The findings from this study have highlighted inconsistent practice across the Youth Justice System when it comes to keeping children fully informed about what is happening to them with practice improvement required to enable children to fully collaborate in decision-making about matters affecting them.

2. Involve children in decision-making about matters affecting them

The interviews with children highlighted both strategic and practice-level improvements to ensure that children are involved in youth justice decision-making processes, and to embed effective collaboration across all levels and stages of the Youth Justice System. The discussion for RQ3 (effective practice) in this report highlighted the importance of positive child-professional relationships (e.g., Case et al., 2023; Creaney, 2020; Wigzell, 2020), professionals caring about children and their outcomes (e.g., Peer Power/YJB, 2021, Fullerton, 2021; Purcell, 2024), and developing support and interventions *together* with their workers based on children's priorities. Findings from this study identified inconsistent youth justice practice and the need for development to improve effective collaboration across the Youth Justice System, which would then better enable the full embedding of Child First more generally (effective collaboration acting as a conduit for the other Child First tenets). Participants from this study provided further suggestions for improvement, including contributing to YJS business plans, involvement in workforce recruitment, and employing justice-experienced mentors.

i. *Strategic level: involve children in business planning and in recruiting caring professionals*

Inviting children to contribute to strategic level decision-making and YJS business planning was identified as an area for development in this study. This builds on the findings of the Peer Power/YJB study (2021, p. 23) which reported that most YJSs (78%) utilised some kind of participatory approach, including children in the production of their annual Youth Justice Plan. However, it is unclear how much real influence children actually had on developing service priorities. Another proposal by children for improving practice in relation to collaboration and engagement at a strategic level was their involvement in workforce recruitment processes and hiring the right professionals to work with children in all youth justice agencies. As reported in our findings,

children highlighted the importance of positive relationship-building and employing staff who care about them. The Peer Power/YJB study (2021, p. 69) recommended recruitment strategies which include the creation of paid employment roles for individuals with justice-experience, including apprenticeships and peer mentor roles which interlinks with practice development (discussed below). Encouragingly, the HMIP (2024) reported explicit evidence of genuine involvement of children in strategic and operational service delivery, including children being actively involved in strategic and operational activity and recruitment.

ii. Practice level: create plans that prioritise and support children's own goals and utilise justice-experienced peer mentors

Create plans that prioritise and support children's own goals: Identifying and prioritising children's own life goals was identified under RQ2 as the main objective of children's collaboration with youth justice agencies, whilst acknowledging that children recognise the role that professionals can play in helping them accomplish their aspirations. Additionally, findings from this study have highlighted the importance of positive future-focused working based on children's individual needs and ambitions, which contrasts with previous deficit- and offence-focused working. This aligns with the Child First model of Constructive Resettlement, which sees one of the main foci for work as supporting a child's aspirations, requiring full co-creation of any plans to ensure that they meet that particular child's individual needs and aims in life (Hazel, 2022). This research has shown that children themselves see this approach as vital and also that it needs to be applied across the board, not just with children being resettled from custody. As previously stated, children specified the collaboration process of asking, listening (and hearing) as vital components to identify their interests to ensure that appropriate co-produced interventions plans were developed. Therefore, a crucial development for practice is to ensure that all youth justice interventions prioritise supporting children to achieve their self-expressed life goals and move forward in their life.

Use justice-experienced mentors: Children at one YOI were enthusiastic about a peer mentoring initiative with which they were involved and suggested this as an area for practice development, recognising the potential benefits of fostering such positive collaborative relationships. Mentors are community members, often with lived experiences of criminal justice, who work or volunteer to help people in rehabilitative settings. Previous literature has highlighted mentors being employed as role models to positively influence the

> *Use justice-experienced mentors:* **Children at one YOI were enthusiastic about a peer mentoring initiative with which they were involved and suggested this as an area for practice development, recognising the potential benefits of fostering such positive collaborative relationships.**

behaviour of mentees as an empowerment-based practice (Buck, 2022), which could counter some of the power *im*balances identified previously discussed. The children in this study who spoke about their

experiences of mentoring felt that somebody with similar life experience would be able to genuinely empathise with them in their circumstances. This finding mirrors previous literature which found mentors to have a credibility that 'professional' rehabilitation workers may not, due to their first-hand experience of many of the same problems and as living proof that change is possible (Buck, 2022; Creaney, 2020). Additionally, Buck (2018) emphasised the importance of the person-centred features of genuinely caring and listening within mentoring relationships, which reflects what children have identified in this study as being crucial to effective collaboration. This area of practice development concurs with Brierley (2023, p.78), who had lived experience of the justice system prior to becoming a youth justice practitioner, who espouses the benefits of 'experiential peers' assisting all areas of the Youth Justice System. He links experiential practice to the Child First approach of creating a collaborative youth justice culture with non-hierarchical relationships, which can positively impact desistance for justice involved children. Furthermore, Myles (2022) relates her own lived experience of the care system and custody to inform her practice and argues that lived experience is under-valued and undermined by colleagues creating a disconnection between justice-involved children and practitioners. She also refers to the unspoken dynamics between colleagues, whereby practitioners are reluctant to hear suggestions that their approach needs to change, and view 'lived experience' practitioners as relationship builders rather than equals in terms of knowledge. This relates back to the earlier discussion about children's views not being respected and their knowledge not given equal weight and value. Finally, Peer Power/YJB (2021) recommend the commissioning of an evaluation of peer mentoring schemes in Youth Justice System across in England and Wales, recognising the potential benefits but also acknowledging the limited empirical research evidence in this area.

RQ4 Conclusions: Collaboration Practice Development

This RQ has built on findings from the other RQs of what children understand and experience as collaboration, what the objectives of collaboration should be, and what children perceive as effective practice, highlighting areas for development and improvement to ensure that children are fully engaged in influencing decisions in matters affecting them at all levels across the Youth Justice System. In conclusion, improvements to collaborative practice need to ensure that children are fully involved, by being consulted, listened to, and have their views respected (be heard and influence actions). Additionally, all intervention plans should prioritise children's own self-expressed life goals and be future focused, rather than based on adult-centric perceptions of what they might need, and be co-produced by children and professionals together. Finally, the youth justice agencies should include children in strategic and practice decision-making processes, including co-producing all youth justice plans (including the annual youth justice plan that is submitted to the YJB), and the recruitment of caring professionals (and justice-experienced mentors) who are interested in supporting children to achieve their aspirations.

Recommendations

These recommendations have been drawn from all four research questions, identifying where children have indicated that practice needs further development, and where their experiences have indicated barriers to their effective collaboration. They start with recommendations which are relevant to **all agencies** associated with youth justice (but could also apply to wider agencies with more tangential association, like children's social care, education, health services); they then move on to some aspects which apply more particularly to **specific agencies**, before concluding with recommendations for developing **youth justice research along more collaborative lines.**

Recommendations for all agencies associated with youth justice, including: YJSs, Courts, Police, Custodial institutions, Solicitors

Recommendation 1

Collaboration within all agencies needs to include ALL FOUR key collaborative elements identified by children:

- **asking children** their opinions on what is important to them and their goals/aspirations/interests
- **listening to (and hearing)** what they are saying about what their goals/aspirations/interests
- **respecting their views** by making changes to their intervention/support plans or informing children why their ideas cannot be actioned. This also relates to children's input to business plans and staff recruitment
- **keeping children informed** both in terms of what they need to know to be meaningfully involved in collaboration, and in the outcomes of that collaboration

Recommendation 2

Children's self-identified goals and aspirations need to inform all youth justice interventions and activities.

- **Police** at Community Resolution and Caution level
- **Courts** when considering disposals
- **YJS** after Cautions and post-Court outcomes as a basis for all intervention plans and referrals to other agencies/identifying of opportunities for children
- **Custodial institutions** when considering sentence and resettlement plans, looking to provide opportunities relevant to their stated aspirations

Recommendation 3

Children need to be actively involved in youth justice decision-making at all levels.

- **Individual level**, involving all intervention and support planning, reparation options, education and training opportunities
- **Organisational level**, including personnel recruitment (also being involved in the actual decision-making process) and local policy development and evaluation studies
- **Policy-making level**, including national strategic planning within all policy-making bodies (e.g. YJB, HMIP, YCS)

| **Recommendation 4** |
| Youth justice personnel need to actively facilitate effective collaboration and neutralise power imbalances. |

•	**Professionals** working with justice-involved children need to be interested, motivated by care (rather than power)
•	**Mentors** could be used (employed or volunteers) to work with children who have justice experience themselves and are therefore more able to empathise
•	**Physical environments** should be designed to be comfortable, child-friendly, power-neutralising, interesting, anxiety-reducing; in other words, a Child First environment should be developed
•	**Creative methods/activities** should be utilised more generally to reduce power imbalances, facilitate better communication, and enable children to develop their own interests and skills (methods to be chosen by the child, generally using their current skill-set, rather than the teaching of new skills, although this could also be incorporated).

| **Recommendation 5** |
| Collaboration needs to be consistent across the whole Youth Justice System, recognising the collaboration tenet of Child First as the facilitator of all the other tenets. |

| • | **All agencies** need to see this as their business |
| • | **All levels of justice involvement**, from prevention/diversion, through community orders, to custody/resettlement |

| **Recommendation 6** |
| To fully embed Child First into youth justice, all policy and practice guidance bodies need to include collaboration principles into their processes. |

•	**YJB** National Standards and Case Management Guidance
•	**HMIP** revised standards for inspecting all agencies delivering youth justice services
•	**Youth Custody Service strategy**
•	**Youth justice workforce training**

| **Recommendation 7** |
| Providers of youth justice services are invited to contribute ideas towards, and make use of, the practitioner pack, which will be distributed as part of this project. |
| This will include such items as: |

•	Practitioner training
•	Posters for youth justice spaces
•	Access to the rap recorded by members of the project PRG, containing the words of some of the research participants

Recommendations for specific agencies associated with youth justice

Recommendation 8: Police

Police services should examine their own practice, according to the principles of good collaboration identified here, especially considering:

- **The four elements in recommendation 1 that link to the child-centred focus of the Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy 2024 – 2027 (NPCC 2024)**
- **The challenges presented by the need for addressing power imbalances** where possible, which inhibit children's ability to effectively collaborate
- **The possibilities around creating a Child First environment for all children entering police stations**, including waiting spaces and others staff with whom they may come into contact, ensuring that all are trained in Child First approaches
- **The NPCC should look to roll out to all police services a Child First policing policy**, to ensure that children do not have an inconsistent experience of policing depending on their location
- **The police should continue to investigate and respond to issues of institutional racism** which children from this project appear to be continuing to experience. Children suggested further training and employing police officers that reflect communities.
- **Child First collaborative practice should be incorporated into the College of Policing individual professional development**

Recommendation 9: Courts

Courts should examine their own practice, according to the principles of good collaboration identified here, especially considering:

- **How children can be facilitated to meaningfully contribute to sentencing decisions**
- **Creating Child First environments for children, to neutralise power imbalances** where possible, and address anxiety, ensuring that this also covers waiting spaces and court staff, as well as court rooms

Recommendation 10: Custody

All custodial provision for children should be Child First in approach, facilitated by robust practice supporting collaboration with children, particularly considering the following:

- **Creating a Child First environment** which actively seeks to neutralise power imbalances and create comfortable spaces for children, including the rooms of children on lower levels of the institution incentive scheme
- **Ensure that initiatives to become involved in decision-making are available to all** rather than just those on the highest level of the institution behaviour incentive scheme, and are well publicised
- **Ensure that all four stages of collaboration (see recommendation 1) are followed** for both individual children and those involved in organised initiatives, especially ensuring children are kept informed of the outcome of their ideas in the decision-making process

Recommendations for academics embarking on youth justice research
Recommendation 11
Ensure that the voice of the justice-involved child is incorporated into all research into youth justice matters to ensure that findings do not privilege adult-centric approaches, assumptions, knowledge and understanding.
Recommendation 12
Incorporate some level of child involvement in the conception, development, execution and dissemination of youth justice-related research, to better incorporate children into its heart
• **Consider the use of a PRG to do this alongside another participant group of children** – a guide base on our experiences in this project will be forthcoming to disseminate our learning from this experience
Recommendation 13
Fund future research to further examine the cross-agency complexities raised by this project by conducting an in-depth examination into individual youth justice agencies, particularly the police and courts, incorporating recommendations 11 and 12. The authors acknowledge the current Nuffield 'Children in Police Custody: Piloting a 'Child First' approach project (Kemp and Bevan 2023 – 2025), that will provide further insight of implementing the Child First in a police force including the 'collaboration' tenet.

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Appendices

EXAMPLE OF Interview schedule - System Journey Overview (updated after PRG sessions)

(Remember to RECORD interview)

- Start with some relationship building questions – be friendly and spend some time getting to know the child.

- Explain the project: Children's Rights UNCRC Article 12 – the right to participate and have a voice in matters affecting you; an opportunity to get your voice heard; informing Youth Justice System policy and practice to implement Child First justice.

- Ethics and Consent/Assent – explain and gain.

- Use child-friendly language - "communication", "consultation", "information", "involvement" and "have a say and be listened to", "decisions affecting you" – e.g. plans, activities.

Creative Activities to enhance interview processes/break down power inequalities

- Would you rather?/Have you ever? questions,
- Squeezy stress balls,
- Lego/Playdough challenge
- Circle cards and coloured pens for writing rap lyrics.

Your Youth Justice Experience – background questions

- How long have you been involved with the Youth Justice Service/in custody?
- What type of order are you on?/ How are you being supported by [YJ Service]? (Pre-court/Prevention/Court Order – Community-based/DTO/Licence
- What do you think about your experience so far?

Child First? Examining children's perspectives of their 'effective' collaboration in youth justice decision-making'

1. Collaboration understandings

- What agencies/services have you been involved with?
- When you've been involved with the different agencies and stages of the Youth Justice System how have been *involved* when stuff is decided about you and how much say do you get in what happens?
  - Police
  - Courts
  - Youth Offending Team
  - Education
  - Children Social Care
  - Health
  - Others
  - decisions around arrest and sentencing, assessment of your needs, planning of support programmes
- How does this feel?
- Can you think of anything you'd like to change?

2. Collaboration objectives

- How do you think getting your view on things will change anything?
- What difference should getting your opinion/thoughts make to what happens to you...in the [YJ Service]
- What do you think is the aim of working together with your YJ worker/case worker?
- Do you discuss your goals and interests?

3. 'Effectiveness' (of child's plan/involvement)

- What kind of stuff do you do with [YJ Service]?
- Do you have/have you had a plan/what's on it?
- How was that decided/did you get to decide what went into the plan?
- Has there been anything on any plans which you didn't want to do, but got put on there anyway?
- How did that make you feel?
- How did that affect what you think of the [YJ Service]?
- Picking up on what they've actually done - What do you think was the point of that?'
- Do you think it worked?'
- What would you have liked to have done? Would this have worked better do you think?
- What would be a successful outcome of your involvement with [YJ Service]
- Do you have a YJ worker/case worker? What are they like?

4. Practice development – Child First

- Have you heard of the term 'Child First'?
- Explain/talk about the 4 x tenets:

- Seeing children as children – not the same as adults – focused on you, building good relationships
- Positive outcomes for you - helping good things to happen and positive views of you
- Encouraging you to be part of decisions and planning affecting you
- Promote diversion from offending - stopping you from getting into more serious trouble

- Do you think what's happened to you with the Youth Justice System been '*Child First*'?
- Are you involved in decisions that affect you? Reparation? Activities? Education? Plans?
- How could what happened with you have been *improved* to make it more 'Child First'?

5) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about? What's important to you?

6) Laptops – overview of digital diaries, showing children the choice of apps to use (if applicable)

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

EXAMPLE OF Child First - How are you involved in youth justice decisions that affect you?

What we're aiming to do

We are doing a 'Child First' Project to help us understand what you think about how you're involved in youth justice decisions that affect you. Child First justice means you are centre stage, it makes your rights, engagement and views a priority and promotes ways to turn you away from offending behaviour. It focuses on positive results for you.

This is an opportunity for you to have your say about your experiences and views. The project aims to produce straight-forward guidance and other materials to help youth justice staff when they are working with you and involving you in making decisions. We would also like your help to develop staff training on including children's views into their practice.

What's in it for me?

- An opportunity to give your views and lead changes within the Youth Justice System

What's involved?

- Completing digital diary entries, on an iPad lent to you by the project, about what interventions you've been involved in with your YOT worker and activities in your free time, your interests and how you feel. You can do as many entries as you like.
- Participation in recorded interviews about:
- your involvement in decisions about issues that affect you, for example activities or interests that your YOT worker has supported you with, education and training, and interventions that support you to make positive changes.

- Experiences and examples of what's happened to you at different times and in different parts of the Youth Justice System e.g. with the police, Youth Offending Teams, Youth Offending Institutions.

This study will use creative approaches to help your involvement in the project, for example, artwork, film, drama, song writing, rap writing/performing, photography, creative writing and poetry (approaches will be agreed according to what you're interested in).

Your YOT worker will go through the information sheet with you and answer any questions you have.

Talk to others about the study before making a decision if you wish.

If you require any further information or have any queries, you can speak to your YOT worker at any stage of the project.

Further Information/Consent/Data Protection

- After you have read this information, asked any questions you may have and decide to take part, you will need to sign a consent form (> 16, but under 18 years old)/assent form (< 16 years of age). There will be follow up contact and we will agree how to do this with your YOT Worker. Your parents/guardians will need to sign a consent/assent form to agree to you taking part.
- It is your choice to either take part or not take part, it is not compulsory to participate. You can refuse to answer individual questions or stop taking part in the project whenever you want, without having to give any explanation, responses you have given up to this point will be excluded from the study.
- There is neither advantage nor disadvantage because of your decision to participate or not participate in this research.
- Interviews will be audio recorded for analysis; any identifiable information will be removed from recording transcripts.
- Your name or information about you will not be included anywhere because it will be kept anonymous.
- Your data will only be used in relation to this project and will be deleted on completion of the project.
- There are limits to what the researchers can keep to themselves; if you say something which might mean that you or someone else is in danger, this will be disclosed.
- Your YOT worker will be able to support you if problems arise from this research.

EXAMPLE OF Child First? Examining children's perspectives of their 'effective' collaboration in youth justice decision-making'

What this project is aiming to do

We are undertaking a 'Child First' research project to develop greater understanding of what children think about how they're involved in youth justice decision-making. Child First justice is an approach that places children centre stage, prioritises children's rights, engagement, and views, promotes diversion away from the Youth Justice System (YJS) and is focused on positive results for children.

We are inviting children involved with youth offending teams to help us and would like to know about their experiences and views. The project aims to produce child-friendly guidance and materials on collaborative practice, with training made available to youth justice staff on embedding children's views into their practice.

What we're asking children to do

- Completing digital diary entries, on an iPad lent to them by the project, about what interventions they've been involved in with their YOT worker and activities in their free time, their interests and how they feel. They can do as many entries as they like.
- Participation in recorded interviews about:
- their involvement in decisions about issues that affect them, for example activities or interests that their YOT worker has supported them with, education and training, and interventions that support them to make positive changes.

- Experiences and examples of what's happened to them at different times and in different parts of the Youth Justice System e.g. with the police, Youth Offending Teams, Youth Offending Institutions.

This study will use creative approaches to help children's involvement in the project, for example, artwork, film, drama, song writing, rap writing/performing, photography, creative writing, and poetry (approaches will be agreed according to what children are interested in).

Information about your child/Consent

- If you wish your child to take part, you will need to sign a consent form. There will be follow up contact with your child and we will agree how to do this with the YOT key contact person.
- All information collected within the digital diary and during interviews will be kept confidentially and securely by the researchers.
- Children's views and information collected about them during this study will be anonymised and their name will not appear in any research reports.
- Your child can refuse to answer individual questions or stop taking part in the project whenever they want, and you can withdraw them yourself without giving any reason, without their legal rights being affected. Any responses your child has given up to that point will be excluded from the study.

- Their data will only be used in relation to this project and will be deleted on completion of the project.
- Interviews will be audio recorded for analysis; any identifiable information will be redacted from recording transcripts.
- There are limits to what the researchers can keep to themselves; if your child says something which might mean that they or someone else is in danger, this will be disclosed.
- Their key worker will be able to support them if problems arise from this research.
- If you require any further information, have a complaint or query, please contact either Andrea Nisbet (Research Associate) **a.nisbet@lboro.ac.uk;** Professor Stephen Case (Project Lead) **S.Case@Lboro.ac.uk,** Dr. Kathy Hampson (Co-researcher) **kah47@aber.ac.uk**

Data Protection Privacy Notice

Loughborough University will be using information/data from your child in order to undertake this study and will act as the data controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after their information and using it properly.

What personal information will be collected from them and how will it be used?

dentifiable personal information including your child's name will be collected. We need your child's name as part of the consent process. Other personal information collected will be your child's age and ethnicity to ensure a good representation of children in the Youth Justice System. We will contact them via their YOT worker.

What is the legal basis for processing their personal information?

Personal data will be processed on the public task basis. For further details on the data protection legislation see: https://ico.org.uk/your-data-matters/

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), some of the personal data which will be collected from you is categorised as "sensitive data". The processing of this data is necessary for scientific research in accordance with safeguards. This means that study has gone through an ethical committee to ensure that the appropriate safeguards are put in place with respect to the use of your personal data.

How long will my identifiable personal information be retained?

We will keep identifiable personal information about you until the study is completed and no longer than six months.

Will their identifiable personal information be shared with others?

Their identifiable personal information will only be shared with the investigators involved in the study.

Will their taking part in this study be kept confidential?

No identifiable personal information will be included in any of the project submissions or shared beyond the investigators. No individual will be identifiable in any report, presentations or publications.

How will the anonymised data/results collected from me be used?

Your anonymised data will be used in research reports, publications and presentations.

All information will be securely stored on the University IT systems (OneDrive).

How long will the anonymised data/results be retained?

Anonymised data will be archived to the University's (Confidential) Research Repository and held indefinitely for future research.

What if I am not happy with how the research was conducted?

If you are not happy with how the research was conducted, please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Review Sub-Committee, Research & Innovation Office, Hazlerigg Building, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough, LE11 3TU. Tel: 01509 222423. Email: researchpolicy@lboro.ac.uk

The University also has policies relating to Research Misconduct and Whistle Blowing which are available online at https://www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/research-ethics-integrity/research-integrity/.

If you require any further information regarding the General Data Protection Regulations, please see: https://www.lboro.ac.uk/privacy/research-privacy/.

EXAMPLE OF Child First? Examining children's perspectives of their 'effective' collaboration in youth justice decision-making'

Background

The Nuffield Foundation has commissioned a Child First research project to develop greater understanding of what children think about how they're involved in youth justice decision-making processes. Child First justice is an approach that places children centre stage, prioritises children's rights, engagement, and views, promotes diversion away from the Youth Justice System (YJS) and is focused on positive results for children.

We are inviting children in custody to help us and would like to know about their experiences and views. The project aims to produce child-friendly guidance and materials on collaborative practice, with training made available to youth justice staff on embedding children's views into their practice. This is an opportunity for children to give their views that lead to change in the YJS and learn about creative methods (see below).

Methodology

- Completing diary entries, about what children have been doing at school and in their free time, their interests and how they feel. They will be able to do as many entries as they like.
- Participation in interviews about:
- their involvement in decisions about issues that affect them, for example daily routines, education, interventions, and resettlement.

- Experiences and examples of what's happened to them at various times and in different parts of the Youth Justice System e.g. with the police, Youth Offending Teams, Youth Offending Institutions.

This study will use creative approaches to help children's involvement in the project, for example, artwork, drama, song writing, rap writing/performing, photography, creative writing, and poetry (approaches will be agreed according to what children are interested in and whether it is possible in the YOI).

Recruitment

If you are supporting a child who you think will be interested in joining our project, please speak to your key contact, You will need to complete a recruitment form. To ensure that the project has a broad representation of the YJS, a purposive sample will be drawn from the YOI. Fieldwork cohort criteria will include:

- Gender – Male, Female, Other
- Ethnicity – Asian, Black, Mixed Race, Other, White
- Age - 10 to 17 year olds
- Developmental issues – e.g. ADHD, Autistic Spectrum Disorders, Speech Language Communication Difficulties
- Social issues – e.g. Looked After by the Local Authority
- Stages of the YJS – Pre-court (bail, remand), Out-of-Court disposal (Youth Caution, Youth Conditional Caution), Community Court disposal (Referral Order, Youth Rehabilitation Order with or without Intensive Supervision and Surveillance), Custody (Detention and Training Order, other custody sentences), post-custody resettlement.

The project has been approved by HMPPS National Research Committee and Loughborough Ethics Review Sub-committee, and adheres to rigorous ethical standards including:

- Participants will be asked to sign a consent form prior to the research taking place.
- In accordance with current data protection legislation, all data collected in the digital diaries and during the interviews will be considered confidential and will be stored safely and securely by the researchers. Personal data will be destroyed on completion of this project.
- Participant views and statements will be anonymised within subsequent reports, conference presentations, or other forms of research output.
- Participants can refuse to answer individual questions and have the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Any responses children have given up to this point will be excluded from the study.
- There will be neither advantage nor disadvantage because of their decision to participate or not participate in the research.
- Participants will be asked to consent to follow-up contact and the method of this contact will be agreed with the key contact at the Youth Offending Institute (YOI)/Secure Children's Home (SCH).
- There is a limit to what researchers can keep confidential; behaviour that is against YOI or SCH rules and can be adjudicated against, illegal acts, and behaviour that is potentially harmful to the child (e.g. intention to self-harm or complete suicide) or others will be disclosed.
- Children will be made aware of avenues of support for those who are caused any distress or anxiety.

If have any quetions or concerns in relation to this project, please contact either: Professor Stephen Case (Project Lead) **S.Case@Lboro.ac.uk**, Dr. Kathy Hampson (Co-researcher) **kah47@aber.ac.uk** , Andrea Nisbet (Research Associate) **A.Nisbet@Lboro.ac.uk,**

Informed Assent/Consent for Child
EXAMPLE OF Child First: Involvement in Youth Justice Decision-making
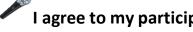
Participant Identification Number (research team to fill in):

Please look at the information below and agree before you take part in the interview.

I have seen the information sheet about this project and understand what it is about.

I know I don't have to answer individual questions if I do not want to and I can stop at any stage. It is up to me.

I understand that the personal information will be collected about me. This information will be kept safely and not shared with anyone. Personal information will not be included in reports.

I understand that there are limits to how much researchers can keep to themselves, if I say something which might mean that I or someone else is in danger.

I agree to my participation being audio recorded for analysis.

I am happy to take part in this research.

Consent to participate: I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Name of participant	Date	Signature

Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

INFORMED Parental CONSENT FORM

Child First: Involvement in Youth Justice Decision-making

(To be complete after the project information sheet has been read)

Participant Identification Number (research team to fill in):

Name of child:

		Please initial to confirm agreement
1	The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the Loughborough University Ethics Review Sub-Committee.	
2	I have read and understood the information sheet and this consent form.	
3	I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
4	I understand that I am under no obligation to agree for my child to take part in the study, have the right to withdraw my child from this study at any stage for any reason, and will not be required to explain my reasons for withdrawing my child from the study.	
5	I agree that information my child provides can be quoted anonymously in research publications, academic research events, conferences, books.	
6	I understand that the personal information collected from my child will be name, date of birth, ethnicity, disposal type and care status.	
7	I understand that all the personal information my child or I provide will be processed in accordance with data protection legislation and will be treated in strict confidence unless (under the statutory obligations of the agencies which the researchers are working with), it is judged that confidentiality will have to be breached for the safety of the participant or others or for audit by regulatory authorities.	

I voluntarily agree for my child to take part in this study.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Parent/Guardian   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____

Name of person   Date   Signature
taking consent

EAXAMPLE OF Child First - How are you involved in youth justice decisions that affect you?

This Child First Project aims to help us understand what children think about how they're involved in youth justice decisions that affect them. Child First justice means children are centre stage, it makes rights, engagement and views a priority and promotes ways to turn children away from offending behaviour.

It focuses on positive results for children.

It's an opportunity for children to have their say!

A Project Reference Group of young people have been co-working with the research project team to help develop questions and understand results.

What we've found so far for X YOI.

We have spoken to 8 children.

- ➤ **You need to be supported** by pro-active key link officers to participate in the project.
- ➤ **Building trust** and having fun is important for engagement with you.
- ➤ **Squeezy stress balls** gave you something tactile to do/play while talking.
- ➤ **Your Experiences** - visits have revealed **differences** depending on establishment including regimes, individual support and interventions being offered to facilitate positive thinking, development and change.
- ➤ **Limited opportunities** to get involved with decisions affecting you.
- ➤ **Education is important** to most of you, some stating it is a means to be out of your cell, whilst others expressed a genuine interest in improving their knowledge and skills.
- ➤ **Food and Cooking, Activities and Time out of Cell** are important to you and you wanted more say in choosing activities and time out of their cells.
- ➤ **Child Centred:** Children were unable to give examples of individualised planning focusing on strengths and goals to achieve sustained, positive outcomes.

	Child First Collaboration in Decision Making in YJS End of Project Dissemination Schedule			
	Event:	Event Type	Date	Where
1	Child First: Examining children's collaboration in Youth Justice decision-making knowledge exchange.	YJB hosted webinar	23 Oct 2024	Online
2	Association of YOT Managers (AYM) Autumn Conference	Conference What Next for Youth Justice – presentation and panel discussion	16 Oct 2024	Birmingham Conference Centre
3	Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ)	Quarterly members meeting – 'Research in Focus'	6 November 2024	Online
4	British Society of Criminology	Annual Conference	10-11 July 2024	University of Glasgow
5	Stop the Clocks Youth Studies	Conference	3-5 Sept 2024	Ulster University, Belfast
6	European Society of Criminology	Annual Conference	11-15 Sept 2024	Faculty of Law Palace, Bucharest
7	Chil First Participatory Research: The Challenges of Involving Children in Youth Justice Decision-Making	Published in the British Journal of Criminal Justice	November 2024	Online
8	YJS/YOI sample site x 5	Service Meetings	Sept, Oct, Nov, Dec	Online
9	PRG hosting YJS partnership meeting	Meeting	19 Sept 2024	In person
10	PRG hosting YJS team meeting	Meeting	07 Oct 2024	In person