

Piloting a **Child First** approach in police custody

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An evaluation of the Metropolitan Police Service
Child First Custody Pilot

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Partners



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Cover image shows the Child First interview room at Wood Green Police Station

Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. The Child First Custody Pilot in outline	4
3. Evaluation methodology	6
4. Key findings and recommendations	8
4.1 Child First training for MPS officers and staff	8
4.2 Ensuring arrest and detention is only ever used as a last resort for children	9
4.3 Reducing police custody detention periods for children	14
4.4 Challenges in mitigating custody's impact for children	17
4.5 Legal advice	19
4.6 Support from partner agencies	23
Conclusion	27

1. Introduction

The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) have committed to taking a 'Child First' approach in every engagement with a child, including when they are arrested and brought into police custody.¹ This work began in 2022 when the MPS introduced their ground-breaking CHILD initiative (discussed below), in response to the persistent issue of disproportionality in youth justice and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC's) [2021 Action Plan](#) to tackle this issue. The Child First Custody Pilot is the next stage in the MPS moving towards adopting this approach in all London custody suites.² Against the background of the changes made under CHILD, this report summarises the key findings of the Child First Custody Pilot and reflects on progress made since delivery of the full project report to the MPS on 18 August 2025.

What is Child First?

In England and Wales, Child First is now the guiding principle of the youth justice system.³ It is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and is underpinned by a substantial evidence base establishing its effectiveness in reducing offending and producing positive outcomes for children and their communities.⁴ Child First requires children to be treated as children, so that their best interests are prioritised and their particular needs and capacities are recognised. Child First approaches encourage children's active participation and wider social inclusion, and require a focus on prevention, diversion and minimal intervention to reduce the stigmatising effects of contact with the criminal justice system.⁵ While Child First now informs and shapes the policy and practice of Youth Justice Services (YJS),⁶ it is much less well-embedded in policing practice.⁷ However, led by the National Police Chief's Council, child-centred policing approaches have recently gained ground.⁸ The MPS, in their [2024 Children's Strategy](#), pledge to *"work better, with our safeguarding partners and with children, to see the 'Child First' and adapt our response to recognise their needs"* (p5).

Why police custody?

Arrest and detention in police custody are purely procedural actions designed to facilitate investigation. They are not intended to operate as punishment. However, recent research has revealed that children (10–17 year olds) commonly find being held in police custody difficult to cope with, particularly waiting alone in cells for many hours. They often view detention as a form of punishment, even where officers try their best to improve the experience for them.⁹

1 MPS (2024) [MPS Children's Strategy](#).

2 During the research, the pilot was referred to as the 'Child First custody, training and Research Pilot' (ChiRP).

3 Youth Justice Board (YJB) (2022) [A Guide to Child First](#).

4 Stephen Case and Ann Browning (2021) [Child First Justice: The Research Evidence-base](#) (Loughborough University).

5 Lesley McAra and Susan McVie (2007) 'Youth Justice? The Impact of Agency Contact on Desistance from Offending', *European Journal of Criminology* 4(3): 315–45.

6 Also referred to as Youth Offending Teams or Youth Offending Services.

7 Vicky Kemp, Nicola Carr, Hope Kent and Stephen Farrall (2023) [Examining the impact of PACE on the detention and questioning of child suspects](#) (Nuffield Foundation).

8 See for example NPCC (2025) [Children and Young Persons Policing Charter](#).

9 Miranda Bevan (2022) [The pains of police custody for children: A recipe for injustice and exclusion?](#), *British Journal of Criminology*, 2022–07, Vol.62 (4), p.805–821; Kemp and others (2023) (fn 6); Miranda Bevan (2024) [Children in Police Custody: Adversity and Adversariality Behind Closed Doors](#) (OUP).

Children describe feeling angered and frustrated by harsh custody experiences, and report a reduction in confidence in the police as a result.¹⁰

Children have a right to be arrested and detained only as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period.¹¹ The law is clear that their best interests should be a primary consideration in making the decision to arrest, and that less intrusive alternatives to arrest should be considered before doing so.¹² However, in the year ending March 2025 more than 58,000 children were detained in police custody in England and Wales, the equivalent of 160 children on average every day.¹³ The MPS made 9,264 of those child arrests.¹⁴ Research across a range of forces reveals that child arrests, and subsequent detentions, are not always necessary (as the legislation requires)¹⁵ or proportionate to the suspected offending of the child, and that children are commonly detained for very long periods, on average approximately 11 and a half hours.¹⁶

The legislation requires all children in police custody to opt into having legal advice.¹⁷ This has long been a cause of concern, with younger children, in particular, being the least likely age-group to request a lawyer.¹⁸ There have been considerable improvements in uptake in recent years,¹⁹ led in part by the MPS' CHILD initiative discussed below. However, there have been growing calls for mandatory legal advice for children and child-specialist training for lawyers representing children,²⁰ in recognition of the distinct legal framework for children, and the combination of developmental immaturity and high levels of vulnerability within the child population in police custody.

The MPS's CHILD initiative

The MPS have been at the forefront of introducing Child First measures into police custody. In early 2022, the MPS piloted the mandatory call-out of a lawyer for children in two custody suites. From May 2022, this requirement was then rolled-out into all London custody suites, as part of the MPS CHILD initiative and in response to MOPAC's 2021 disproportionality Action Plan. The mnemonic is used as a prompt to custody officers regarding what action to take when dealing with a child. 'C' reminds the custody officer of the changed presumption regarding legal advice and for them to call out a lawyer for the child, the 'H' requires them to have an early conversation with the appropriate adult (AA), the 'I' indicates they should 'inform the local authority' within an hour that a child has been detained (also known as Operation Harbinger), the 'L' is another reminder of the need to arrange a lawyer, and the 'D' is a requirement to 'direct the investigation without delay'.

10 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Children in Police Custody (APPG) (2025) [Making children's rights a reality in police custody](#).

11 UNCRC Article 37(b).

12 Children Act 2004 s11; *ST v CC of Nottingham Police* [2022] EWHC 1280 (QB), paras 94 and following.

13 Home Office (2026) *Police custody and pre-charge bail, year ending March 2025* (London: Home Office).

14 Home Office (2026) n14, [Police Custody Data Tables DO4](#).

15 PACE s37(3).

16 Kemp and others (2023) (fn 7), d from analysis of 3,722 children drawn from eight police force areas.

17 PACE s58(1).

18 Vicky Kemp, Pascoe Pleasance and Nigel J Balmer, *Children, Young People and Requests for Police Station Legal Advice: 25 Years on from PACE* (2011) Youth Justice 28.

19 Kemp and others (2023) (fn 7).

20 See for example UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, 22 June 2023, CRC/C/GBR/CO/6-7, para 17.

2. The Child First Custody Pilot in outline

Funded by MOPAC, the MPS and the London Boroughs of Haringey and Enfield, the Child First Custody Pilot builds on the progress made under CHLD and was implemented in Brixton (BRI) and Wood Green (WG) custody suites from 13 November 2024 to 19 March 2025. The MPS also identified two custody suites to be used for comparison purposes: Wembley (WEM) and Bromley (BRO). In these suites the MPS-wide CHLD adjustments were in place, but no additional Child First changes were made during the pilot period.

The aim of the Child First Custody Pilot was to ensure that children received child specialist support from officers and police custody staff from the point of their arrival at the police station and, shortly thereafter, from a child-specialist lawyer. By encouraging diversion and the adoption of a Child First approach, the adjustments were intended to decrease the number of children detained unnecessarily in police custody, the time children spent in custody and the number of children charged. The pilot also sought to address the disparity of experiences and outcomes for children detained for questioning.

The pilot was designed to create behaviour change through establishing a clear and distinct pathway for children in police custody and by educating practitioners about the principles underpinning Child First approaches, and the legal framework for children. This included robust decision-making at the point of authorisation of detention for children, a presumption of legal advice and a call to the Duty Solicitor Call Centre (DSCC) within 45 minutes of a child being detained. Thereafter, the pilot scheme required custody officers and lawyers to hold a 'safety net discussion', shortly after booking-in, reviewing the rationale for detention and exchanging key information about the detained child. Custody officers were also encouraged to work with investigating colleagues to ensure, wherever possible, that early consideration was given to diversion and, that the child was interviewed within 6 hours, working towards release at least within 12 hours. Early steps were also to be taken to ensure transfer to local authority accommodation for children charged and remanded to court.²¹

The behaviours required by the pilot reflect the current law (Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE), PACE Code C and Code G, and accompanying caselaw) and guidance (Authorised Professional Practice),²² with the exception of the enhanced requirements for engagement at an early stage with legal advice and the prioritisation of a child detainee by working towards a 12-hour maximum initial detention period.

This changed process pathway was facilitated by a MPS Service Level Agreement (SLA) and by a checklist for custody officers to follow and paste into the detention log for each child detainee (which would then be made available for review by the research team). Likewise, lawyers also worked to their own checklist and were invited to record their actions for the researchers through completing a Microsoft form for each relevant attendance.

²¹ Under s38(6) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

²² College of Policing, [Authorised Professional Practice](#) (Detention and Custody) (Children and Young Persons).

Training

The process and behaviour change was supported by specialist training. This was provided to custody officers, lawyers who cover the two pilot custody suites,²³ as well as colleagues from the relevant Local Authorities, ENGAGE teams²⁴ and appropriate adult services. This training was delivered by the Youth Justice Legal Centre, the Youth Practitioners Association, London Criminal Court Solicitors' Association and Child Rights Youth Justice CIC – working alongside psychotherapists, Jennifer Summer and Raphael Cadenhead (funded through the Frontline Organisation as part of their Innovation Programme).

Training was delivered to 52 lawyers in a single group across two sessions, a full day on Saturday 14 September and a shorter evening session on Monday 16 September 2024. Training was delivered to MPS officers and partners working in the pilot suites in two groups on 29 October and 12 November 2024. The training covered the same topics for both groups (albeit the police training was somewhat reduced in comparison to the legal training sessions):

- The Child First Custody Pilot arrangements: checklists and SLA
- Child First and child-centred policing approaches
- Legal framework for the detention of children
- Voluntary attendance/Caution +3
- Child welfare and child criminal exploitation
- Engaging with children (psychotherapist intervention)
- ST v CC of Nottingham Police [2022] EWHC 1280 (QB)
- Racism, children and the police
- Neurodivergence, ACEs and trauma informed practice
- Diversion (including local options), the Child Gravity Matrix and care experience

Physical adjustments to Wood Green Custody Suite

Prior to the pilot study, some child-centred adjustments had been made to the physical fabric of Wood Green custody suite. These include 'child cells' (painted sage green, with blackboard and sticker decorations), a discrete booking-in area for children, a Child First interview room with comfortable seats and an LED sky panel on the ceiling, and a Child First consultation room with embedded TV screen and LED ceiling panel. No physical changes had been made in Brixton.

²³ Comprising both solicitors and accredited police station representatives, referred to collectively as lawyers.

²⁴ The Violence Reduction Unit's ENGAGE Programme, embeds youth workers in police custody to engage with children who are detained and enable them to access support and opportunities in the community: [Custody-based diversion – Divert and Engage Programmes | London City Hall](#).

3. Evaluation methodology

This is a mixed methods evaluation, comprising qualitative elements with quantitative data analysis.

Qualitative data

- **23 shift observations by researchers (03/12/24–14/03/25)** (16 in Child First suites, 7 in the comparison suites).
- **78 semi-structured interviews with police officers, police staff and others working on the frontline and in custody in Child First suites (03/12/24–14/03/25)**, including: custody officers (COs), inspectors (known as custody support inspectors) (CSIs), designated detention officers (DDOs), frontline and investigating officers (IOs), lawyers, appropriate adults (AAs), ENGAGE, and Liaison and Diversion (L&D) workers, and youth justice workers.
- **38 semi-structured interviews with police officers, police staff and others working on the frontline and in custody in comparison suites (11/04/25–17/04/25)**
- **13 Online feedback forms** from MPS officers and lawyers.
- **13 semi-structured interviews with children as part of case studies** (where researchers sought to interview all officers and practitioners engaging with the child) (12 detained in Child First suites (CS1–12) and 1 in a comparison suite (CS13). The children ranged in age (2 aged 12, 3 aged 14, 4 aged 16 and 4 aged 17) and custody experience. 3 were white, and 10 from Black or ethnic minority groups. One child identified as female, the remainder as male.
- **Individual and focus group interviews with children following custody experiences:** User Voice²⁵ were also commissioned to conduct research interviews with 18 children who had experience of being held in custody in the two pilot suites (14 in Wood Green and 4 in Brixton) during the pilot period.
- **Review of 51 police interviews of children:** Researchers reviewed a randomised sample of 40 recorded police interviews of children (10 interviews from each of the pilot and comparison suites) and 11 police interviews of the 13 children who participated in case studies (51 interviews in total).²⁶

²⁵ User Voice used a peer researcher with lived experience of the criminal justice system to carry out these research interviews. See <https://www.uservoice.org/> for more information.

²⁶ The review analysed the questioning of the child in accordance with the framework identified by Laura Farrugia and Fiona Gabbert (2020) *Vulnerable suspects in police interviews: Exploring current practice in England and Wales*, Journal of Investigative Psychology and Offender Profiling, Vol 17(1), 17–30. In addition, each interview was considered for the delivery of legal rights, engagement of the lawyer and the appropriate adult. The analysis also considered whether safeguarding questions were asked and responded to.

Quantitative data

- **Electronic custody record data:** Dr Hope Kent, University of Nottingham, consultant on the project, analysed electronic custody record data obtained from the two pilot and two comparison suites for the pilot period (13/11/24–19/03/25) and for the same period in preceding year (13/11/23–19/03/24).
- **Hand-compiled datasets:** MPS sergeants working within Met Detention hand-compiled more detailed custody record data for the two pilot and two comparison suites for the pilot period. These included key timing metrics, legal advice requests, and vulnerability flags for both pilot and comparison suites.
- **Detention logs:** Researchers also reviewed anonymised and redacted detention logs (minus front sheet and risk assessment) for all child detentions in the two pilot suites for the period 17/11/24 – 21/01/25 (totalling 199 PACE detention logs, referenced by chronological number and by custody suite). In addition to the hand-compiled metrics, researchers also logged: use of force, vulnerability, care experience and compliance with the checklist requirements.
- **Training survey data:** Prior to the training sessions, participants were invited to complete a 'baseline survey', exploring their previous training in relevant areas, and asking them to respond to statements about Child First approaches and to reflect on their expectations for the training. At the conclusion of the training, participants completed an 'endline survey' reflecting on the training and responding again to the same propositions.

Ethics approval for this study was obtained through the Research Ethics Committee, University of Nottingham and the MPS Research Ethics Board. All interviews, observations and case studies were transcribed and coded thematically using NVivo.

The recommendations made in this report are colour-coded to differentiate:

● **recommendations for the MPS alone**, ● **recommendations for the MPS and their partner agencies**, and ● **recommendations for government or with a national framing**.

Data challenges

The in-depth analysis of custody record data, and cross-comparison with the detailed detention log review, revealed a number of inadequacies in the recording of data, and its availability for robust analysis. In particular, it has not been possible to produce robust calculations of detention durations or to track outcomes for children following custody episodes, as had been anticipated in designing the project. Other gaps identified, including the recording of self-reported ethnicity, and uptake of legal advice, have been noted in other forces as well. Indeed, the January 2026 [White Paper](#) on policing has identified national issues with data quality and consistency across the sector.²⁷ Some other issues are a function of the software used by the MPS. However, researchers identified a number of remediable gaps in data collection, including detention duration and requests for accommodation when a child is remanded for court. As a result of recommendations made in the full project report, the MPS have made changes to their data collection and analysis, including robust collection and regular analysis of detention duration for children, and this improved data picture is now shared with local authorities on a monthly basis, subject to appropriate data protections.

27 Home Office, *From Local to National: A New Model for Policing*, January 2026, pp 49–50.

4. Key findings and recommendations

4.1 Child First training for MPS officers and staff

The research revealed, across frontline, investigation and custody teams, a workforce which overall is genuinely and highly motivated to do their best for the children they encounter, their families and communities. However, at the time of the pilot, the training survey indicated low levels of prior formal training on Child First approaches, the vulnerabilities likely to be experienced by child suspects, on communicating with children and on diversion. Officers and civilian staff who had not attended the training tended to describe in interviews even lower levels of training in these areas of child-specific knowledge and practice.

Those who had attended the Child First training as part of the pilot generally reflected positively on the content and it was apparent from their engagement with the pilot, and the efforts many made to adjust their practices, that the training was having a beneficial impact on introducing a Child First approach to children. Some child participants reflected on being treated positively in the pilot suites, *"They were very nice to me and I felt safe. Aye they offered me food and they gave me a blanket."* (User Voice participant, BRI). By contrast, the lack of training for the wider response and investigation teams meant that a significant proportion of officers failed initially to appreciate the reasons for taking a Child First approach, were more likely to adopt more punitive responses towards children coming to their attention and did not commonly value the wider benefits of diversion and minimum intervention. The evidence suggests that, in order to enable them to act effectively on their desire to do their best for the children they encounter, all officers and MPS employees who are likely to come into contact with children, or who deal with their cases, require training on Child First approaches. This is essential to support delivery of the MPS' Children's Strategy and to embed the Child First approach it advocates.

The full report recommended Child First training for all officers and police staff engaging with children, and promotion of the significance of such approaches by the Senior Leadership team. Since the end of the pilot, the MPS have rolled out Child First training to all officers in contact with children. Senior Leadership communications, following the MPS Child Strategy, have also underlined the importance of a Child First approach. This training is a welcome development. It addresses trauma-informed approaches, adultification bias and effective communication with children. It does not, however, cover the diversionary focus at the heart of Child First approaches, and the importance, and effectiveness, of minimum necessary intervention. Extension of the training to cover these aspects is important, in underlining why a holistic Child First approach is both necessary but also likely to reduce offending. The training should also be co-created and co-delivered by the police and external experts, include the voices of children and be embedded as a CPD requirement within the MPS' performance development review, not just for officers but for all MPS employees who come into contact with children.

Recommendation 1: Expand and embed Child First training for all MPS officers and civilian staff engaging with children

That the MPS should extend Child First training to address diversion and minimum necessary intervention, and to embed Child First training as a CPD requirement for all those engaging with children, or reviewing their cases, including those in civilian roles such as PCSOs and detention officers.

The national picture

This study has highlighted the importance and effectiveness of Child First training for all those involved directly with children in police custody. However, the previously low level of child-specific training in the MPS is replicated across other forces participating in the Nuffield research study.²⁸ The findings underline the importance of Child First or child-centred training being included as a mandatory requirement nationally for officers and staff who come into contact with children in their role, as part of the Licence to Practise being explored by the Home Office in the January 2026 policing White Paper. This is in line with Pledge 1 of the NPCC's [Children and Young Persons Policing Charter](#) and the UN [General comment No. 24 \(2019\)](#) on children's rights in the child justice system.

Recommendation 2: Nationally mandated Child First (or child-centred) training for all officers and staff dealing with children

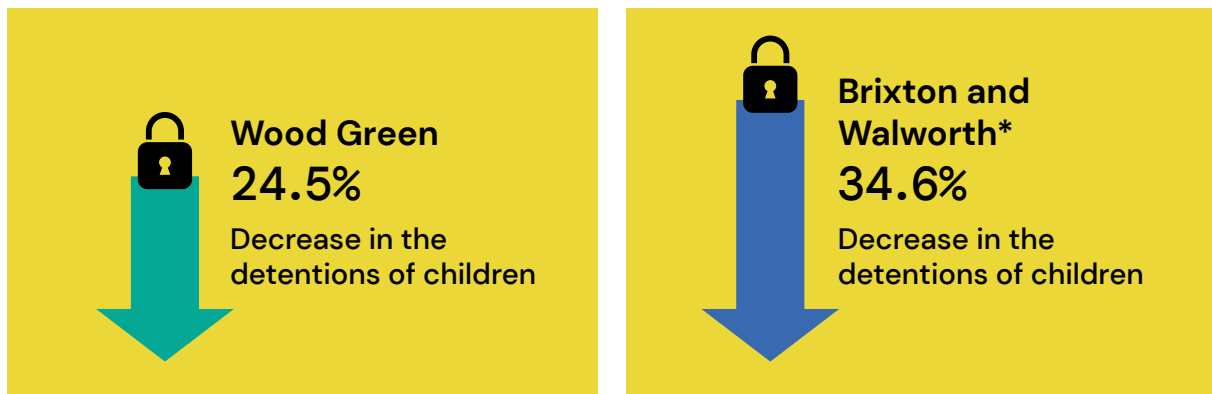
That the Home Office, National Police Chiefs' Council and College of Policing explore the national introduction of mandatory Child First training for all officers and staff dealing directly with children. The training should be co-created and co-delivered by the police alongside external experts, including lawyers, and incorporate the voices of children.

4.2 Ensuring arrest and detention is only ever used as a last resort for children

Custody officers are empowered to authorise the detention of any person under very limited circumstances: where it is necessary to secure or preserve evidence and where it is necessary to obtain evidence by questioning (PACE s37(3)). The Child First checklist required custody officers to 'explore all available alternatives to detention' and to satisfy themselves that detention was '*necessary*' (not just convenient or expedient).

²⁸ See for example Vicky Kemp and Miranda Bevan, [Child Centred Policing in Greater Manchester: Frontline officers' engagement with children suspected of offending \(2025a\)](#).

Reduced numbers of children detained



During the pilot period, there were **significant reductions in the detentions of children** in both pilot suites in comparison with the previous year.²⁹ Whilst child detentions have fallen across the MPS, the comparison suites showed a more modest 9.5% reduction in detention numbers on aggregate.

More robust decision-making in police custody



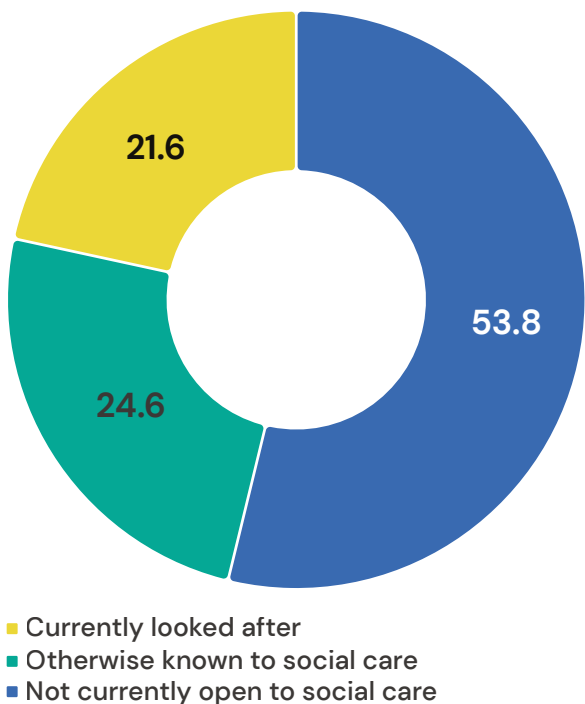
There was a **marked increase in refusals of detention in the pilot suites** (from 2.2% to 11% in Brixton and from 0.9% to 16.6% in Wood Green). Comparison sites also saw a rise in refusals of detention (from 2.3% to 7.1%), but this was much less marked. Observations, interviews and data analysis all revealed that in both pilot suites custody officers were challenging arresting and presenting officers more robustly on the issue of necessity to detain. However, there were still cases where the checklist endorsement on the detention log indicated that the grounds for detention were not strictly in line with the custody officer's powers under s37(3) PACE. Nor was this potential lack of necessity to detain always being identified in inspector's reviews.

²⁹ *Brixton and the neighbouring custody suite of Walworth are analysed together for the purposes of detention numbers because all children arrested in the vicinity of both suites were required to be diverted to Brixton during the pilot period.

High levels of vulnerability

The detention log review identified that the children who were detained during the pilot period experienced high levels of vulnerability. The figures below should be considered a likely under-estimate, given that only information confirmed by the local authority (who did not provide information in relation to every child) or the Police National Computer was counted.

Care status of child PACE detainees in Brixton and Wood Green 13/11/24–31/01/25.

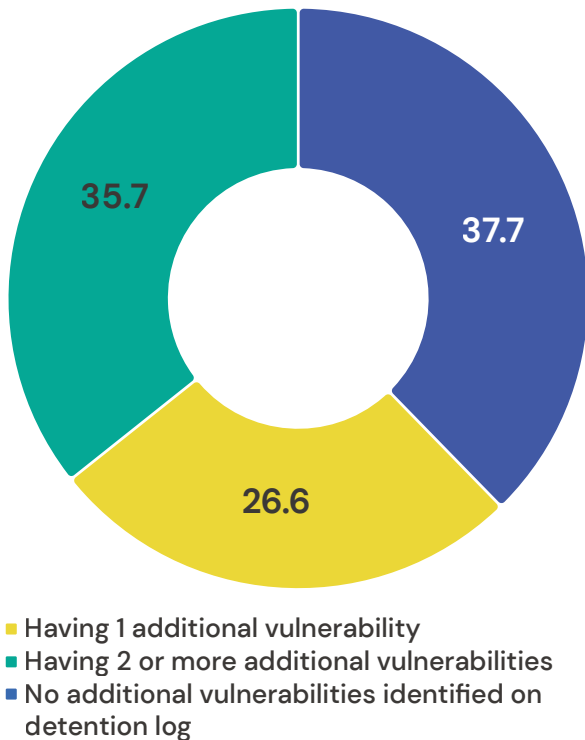


Note:

‘Currently looked after’ = the child is in local authority care or accommodation (s22 Children Act 1989).

‘Otherwise known to social care’ = as a child in need, on a child protection plan, or having an allocated social worker.

Vulnerabilities (in addition to care status) of child PACE detainees in Brixton and Wood Green 13/11/24–31/01/25.



Note:

‘Additional vulnerabilities’ include a diagnosis of ADHD or autism, or an identifiable language need confirmed by local authority or HCP/L&D, recent victimisation, recent or ongoing domestic abuse in their home setting, significant physical illness (e.g. epilepsy), exclusion from school/not in education, and the child being flagged for concerns re CCE/CSE.

Significant racial disproportionality

There was significant racial disproportionality in the group of children detained during the pilot period, with a significant over-representation of children identified as Black in the pilot suites.³⁰ At Brixton, this group accounted for 62.1% of children before Child First and **70.4% during the pilot period**. At Wood Green, proportions were slightly lower but children identified as Black still made up the largest ethnic group (51.5% pre-; **43.9% during the pilot period**). These figures were identified as a substantial over-representation on comparison with local all-ages census data in each area.

The analysis did not reveal disparity in decision-making at the point of authorisation of detention, rather that the disproportionality was present within the group of children arrested and brought into custody. However the numbers of children refused detention were small and so this finding should be approached with caution.

Improving frontline decision-making

The research clearly identified that progress in reducing the numbers of children being detained in police custody, and addressing issues of disproportionality, begins with the frontline. Decision-making at the point of a child coming to police attention can be complex and conducted under significant time and situational pressure. No child should be arrested unless it is 'necessary' and proportionate, and less intrusive alternatives to arrest should be considered before doing so.³¹ These include taking informal action or inviting the child to attend for interview on a voluntary basis (called voluntary attendance or 'caution +3'), where a criminal investigation is required. Where arrest is necessary, for example to enable officers to seize items and to compel the child's attendance for interview, the child can be bailed immediately to attend for interview at an agreed time (called 'street bail'), subject to an appropriate adult being available.³²

The MPS do not have robust data on the use of caution +3 and street bail, although the available data indicate that the former is uncommon and the latter almost never used for children. The research interviews identified a clear lack of confidence in taking these less intrusive approaches when a child comes to police attention as a potential suspect. As one senior officer observed: *"People don't know what to do around caution+3 or street bail – I don't know the last time one of our response officers used street bail instead of arrest."* (IO5. BRI). HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) also noted this as an area requiring improvement in their inspection of all MPS custody suites.³³ There was also some cultural resistance to less intrusive measures, arising from a belief that the punitive experience of custody was an important and timely consequence for children who were considered to be involved in offending.

30 Self-reported ethnicity data was not consistently available, and so officer-defined ethnicity is used.

31 PACE s24(4), PACE Code G, Children Act 2004 s11; *ST v CC of Nottingham Police* [2022] EWHC 1280 (QB), paras 94 and following.

32 PACE s30A.

33 HMICFRS, [Report on an inspection visit to police custody suites in the Metropolitan Police Service](#), 7 August 2025.

The Child First training recommended above is key in enabling better decision-making at this point, particularly if training addresses identification of vulnerabilities, understanding the impact of police custody for children and the basics of the [NPCC's Child Gravity Matrix](#) and [Knife-Crime Guidance](#).³⁴ This would equip officers to gauge the proportionality of arrest, as well as to explain to victims and complainants why less intrusive alternatives to arrest may be more appropriate. However, the evidence of frontline officers suggests that wider use of these less intrusive approaches will require not just training but clear, substantive guidance on how to approach decision-making where a child comes to their attention, what options are available to them and how to engage alternatives to arrest.

Such an approach could also be effectively supported by a requirement for a supervising sergeant within the constable's team to authorise the decision to arrest a child. The introduction of a decision-making flowchart and the requirement for arrest to have a supervisor's approval have enabled Greater Manchester Police to reduce their child custody detentions by over 100 per month across the force since the new process was introduced in July 2024.³⁵

Recommendation 3: Guidance for officers on less intrusive approaches at point of arrest

As part of their Children's Strategy (action 29), that the MPS should review and update processes and guidance for frontline officers, to include:

- i. **trauma-informed communication strategies** to enable officers to de-escalate confrontations,
- ii. **guidance on the use of voluntary attendance** (caution plus 3) (PACE s29) and requirements for the **use of street bail** (PACE s30A),
- iii. **a decision-making flowchart** to ensure all less intrusive options are considered before arrest,
- iv. seeking **supervisor authorisation when deciding to arrest a child**.

Better information for frontline officers

The research revealed that up-to-date information about local diversion and support options was not readily available for frontline officers. There were instances, as a result, where officers felt that arrest was desirable solely because it appeared to them to be the best mechanism for engaging support for a child or their family. Imposing the often-traumatic experience of police detention as a mechanism for accessing help is clearly not a desirable approach. Further issues of partner agency engagement at this stage are addressed in a separate section below.

³⁴ See also Home Office [Government guidance for child knife possession offences](#), 12 February 2026.

³⁵ APPG, [Making children's rights a reality in police custody](#) (2025) p11. For example resources see [Children in police custody: piloting a 'Child First' approach](#) – Nuffield Foundation

Recommendation 4: Local child and family support information for frontline officers

That the MPS and MOPAC work with local YJS and Children's Services in each Basic Command Unit (BCU) to produce accessible and up to date information for frontline officers in each area on available support for children and their families and (where appropriate) pathways for referral.

4.3 Reducing police custody detention periods for children

Early review by the inspector

As part of the CHILD arrangements, inspectors are required to review the detention of any child within an hour of it being authorised; an intervention that had not previously been evaluated in detail. Custody officers welcomed this early review by the inspector, particularly their support in endorsing detention decision-making, where appropriate, and ensuring that child-specific adjustments and processes were not being overlooked. However, the one-hour time limit proved logistically challenging, being met in less than a third of cases across both suites. It was also identified that a slightly longer period, up to 3 hours, would enable the inspector to engage more effectively with information received about the child and to ensure that investigation, and preparation for interview, were progressing effectively. Extending the early review to be completed within three hours, rather than one, was recommended in the full report and this change has already been made across all MPS custody suites.

Working towards interview in 6 hours and release in 12 hours

Most custody officers and inspectors in both suites had really embraced working towards interview in 6 hours and release within 12 hours. There was a real sense that the reduced period gave custody officers a mechanism by which to ensure that children's cases were expedited and to reduce delays arising from shift handover, and other logistical issues. The detention log review revealed numerous instances of custody officers making contact with investigation teams to ensure that the investigation was progressing. Custody officers and inspectors reported no significant challenge from investigation teams: *"We haven't had any pushback or negative feedback and most officers come down quite quickly. The investigators want it being dealt with as quickly as possible and so having two figures in place – 6 and 12 hours – really helps."* (CSI3.BRI). Their colleagues in investigation generally took the view that, for most children, a 12-hour initial period was entirely feasible: *"100% it can be done... It needs some organization and understanding. Already we're getting used to it."* (IO5.WG). This depended, however, on the understanding, widely acknowledged by custody officers, investigators and lawyers, that it would be necessary to detain beyond 12 hours in serious or complex cases (where, for example, scenes required forensic processing, interviews had to be conducted with vulnerable witnesses or where evidence from multiple allegations had to be compiled).

An arrest late in the evening could prove problematic, particularly where the team investigating did not have 24-hour cover. However, in appropriate cases, this prompted consideration of bail before interview. This mechanism was used quite widely during the pilot in both suites and with good effect. The detention logs suggest that **a quarter of the child cases in Brixton, and 16% of the child cases in Wood Green, in the first half of the pilot period were bailed**

before interview. Careful consideration was given to the risk posed and the demands of the investigation, and bail periods were typically very short, often to later in the day or the following day. In such cases bail would be granted once initial investigative processes had been completed (eg the taking of samples or completion of a s18 PACE search of the child's home address) and an appropriate adult was present to receive the child.

Importantly, **no failures to return on bail were identified on the logs reviewed.** This is a very welcome development, with children spending less time in custody and being able to attend for interview rested and with appropriate support.

Average detention periods and overnight detentions

As a result of limitations in the electronic custody record data it is not possible to produce robust calculations of the time spent by children in police custody following their initial arrest.³⁶ Additionally, the data aggregates all detention periods for a single case, counting periods spent in custody when returning on bail with initial detention periods following arrest. As a result, the average detention periods obtainable from the data are generally longer than the child's actual time in custody and do not capture the impact of the increased use of bail before interview in the pilot suites. Nonetheless, bearing in mind those limitations, in both pilot and comparison suites there was a reduction in average detention periods for children during the pilot period in comparison with the same period in the previous year: in Brixton the average detention period for children was reduced by 15%,³⁷ in Wood Green by 26% and in the comparison suites together by 25%.

There was also a modest reduction in the proportion of children held overnight in both pilot and comparison suites during the pilot period.³⁸ In Brixton, the proportion of children held overnight fell slightly from 78.2% to 74.0% during the pilot. In Wood Green, the decrease was more pronounced, from 83.2% to 69.6%. The comparison suites also showed a small decline, from 73.1% to 67.6%.

Recommendation 5: Enhancing the CHILD initiative to ensure that custody is only used as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period

In line with PACE, and in recognition of the child's right to be detained as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period, that the MPS make the following adjustments to CHILD:

- To require custody officers to specify the **particular, case-specific grounds for believing that the child's detention is necessary** (PACE s37(3)),
- To include, in the inspector's first review, a requirement that they identify the **particular, case-specific grounds for believing that the continued detention of the child remains necessary** and confirm that they have satisfied themselves that outstanding evidence is being pursued with due expedition (PACE s40),

³⁶ For example, the end point of detention is calculated from when the record was administratively closed, rather than when the child was in fact released.

³⁷ This figure, and the overnight detention findings for Brixton, might be confounded by the different population of children being detained in Brixton during the pilot period.

³⁸ Using the Home Office counts of overnight detention, being any detention where a child spends more than four hours in custody and any part of that period falls between midnight and 8am.

- That custody and investigation teams **continue to work towards interview in 6 hours and release within 12 hours** for detained children, with the understanding that unusually complex and/or serious cases may require the full 24 hours (or longer).

Reducing post-remand detention periods for children

Approximately 13% of the child PACE detentions during the pilot resulted in remand (41 cases in total across the two suites, 26 in the detention log review period). Section 38(6) of PACE requires children who are refused bail post-charge to be transferred to local authority accommodation, save in exceptional circumstances. However, during the detention log review period only three of the 26 remanded children were transferred, all to non-secure accommodation (the child's home address in two cases). As a result, some children spent extremely lengthy total periods in custody (eg two children were detained for 50 hours and a third for 43 hours).

Interviews with custody officers and inspectors shed light on the challenges they were encountering in securing their transfer. Officers tended to feel that the possibility that alternative accommodation might be needed could rarely be identified with any certainty at an early stage and that there was no point in notifying the local authority early in the child's detention, particularly since the request would not likely be actioned by them until bail had actually been refused. Secondly, there was a general understanding that secure accommodation was simply not available. Thirdly, there was a sense that the local authority might be uncomfortable accepting the risk where non-secure accommodation was sought, or that the non-secure accommodation offered (with parents/carers) might not be suitable. In addition, a number of officers described or revealed a lack of understanding of the legal framework, and some observed that local authority partners were sometimes similarly unsure about the provisions. Finally, whilst officers might escalate to their custody support inspector where no accommodation was available, several took the view that within the local authority there was nowhere to escalate matters to, especially when dealing with Emergency Duty Teams (who provide out of hours coverage for local authorities).

Lawyers did not, according to the logs, have much involvement in assisting officers to navigate the complex legal provisions surrounding remand and ensuring the child's right to transfer is honoured. There was very limited evidence on the detention logs of representations made by lawyers in respect of bail or remand (reference appearing on only 17 of the 199 detention logs reviewed). Lawyers are very rarely present in the custody suite when bail/remand decisions are made, largely because this often occurs several hours after the police interview is completed. Since this issue was raised in the full project report researchers are aware, anecdotally, of efforts being made to improve this situation. Lawyers report that some officers are making contact with them when a bail/remand decision is being made, including by text message, to invite their representations.

These problems with transfer are compounded by very substantial delays in producing remanded children to court in some cases. There were several occasions, on weekdays and weekends, where children were remanded in the morning but not produced to court until the following day. This is not an MPS failing. Rather early cut-off times for SERCO transportation to court (4am) and limited court sitting times (and cell availability) combined to extend post-charge remand periods in a way that is hard to justify.

Recommendation 6: Reducing post-remand detention periods for children

In order to reduce post-remand detention periods for children, the MPS should work with partners to ensure that legal obligations on all stakeholders are met by:

- **joint training** for custody officers, lawyers and social care/emergency duty teams to ensure all parties understand the [Custody Concordat](#) flowchart for decision-making in relation to post-remand transfer,
- agreeing a mechanism **to notify lawyers at the point of bail/remand so that children can receive legal advice and representations be made,**
- agreeing a **protocol for escalation** (including consideration of clawback arrangements under s21(3) Children Act 1989) where requested accommodation is not available, and,
- **reviewing court transportation and reception arrangements** to avoid children spending long periods in custody before court.

4.4 Challenges in mitigating custody's impact for children

There were clear indications that training was beginning to have an impact on the culture in custody when dealing with children. *"As soon as they [child arrestees] walk in the back gate and we meet them, we think more about options, child welfare and family – things like that."* (CO3.BRI). However, the adjustments for children within the pilot were not always implemented. Sometimes this was because not all children were considered to be 'deserving' of age-appropriate treatment, *"We've had people in here terrified. They deserve discrete booking in... But [not those] in gangs who love it."* (CO4.WG). Likewise, sometimes the severity of the alleged offence, for example robbery, was considered to disqualify children from adjustments, such as being questioned in the child interview room. Not infrequently the marginal increase in effort required to adjust the process for a child meant that, when custody teams were working under pressure (as they often were), the protections were not consistently used. Some officers also described hesitation in offering adjustments in case they were considered patronising by the child.

The User Voice interviews reveal that adjusted treatment could make a significant difference for children, a few of whom described positive experiences in the two pilot suites: *"when I got to the station, I got booked by, there was some random police officer, but they were still kind. ... The one that did my DNA, he was pretty nice as well."* (User Voice participant.BRI). However, children's accounts consistently highlighted the traumatic nature of custody experiences across the two sites, particularly where children were detained for lengthy periods in a cell, *"I would say I wanted to kill myself. Well, I wasn't actually going to kill myself, but when you're in a cell for so long... I was knocking my head against the wall... I was losing my mind."* (Case study 1, WG). Children's distress and anger towards the police often focused on situations where requests for support went unanswered or treatment was experienced as disrespectful or unnecessarily harsh: *"The officers treat everyone in there, kind of like they're guilty. You get me? So, I feel like officers to make it better for children, they should have more of an open mind and treat everyone equally and like. Just have more consideration for children as well."* (User voice participant.BRI).

The need for legislative change

The complexity of the challenges presented by children in custody is not to be underestimated, nor the genuine desire of the majority of officers and staff to do their best for the children in their care. However, the evidence reveals a significant gap between Child First aspirations and custody realities. Despite the efforts of custody teams, children did not commonly feel that the process, or their treatment, was adjusted to accommodate their age and needs, nor did they often feel heard or able to engage their rights effectively. The locking of a child in a cell is, by its nature, a stigmatising experience, antithetical to the Child First approach of focusing on the child's pro-social identity. Whilst this study shows that training and guidance can have an impact on the numbers of children being arrested and detained, and on their treatment in custody, these gains are liable to fall away as initial enthusiasm wanes and in the face of resource and political pressure.

Whilst there will always be a small cohort of children for whom some form of pre-charge detention is required, this study makes plain that a truly Child First approach to police custody would keep as many children as possible out of police custody altogether. However, it is clear from this project, and in similar research in other force areas, that some children continue to be detained in breach of their right to detention as a last resort (UNCRC Article 37) and only where it is 'necessary' for investigative purposes (s37(3) PACE). Legislative change is required to reduce the unnecessary use of police custody, particularly for children suspected of minor offences where detention in police custody is likely to be wholly disproportionate.

Recommendation 7: Making police custody a last resort for children

That the Home Office introduce legislation preventing the detention of a child in police custody unless they are arrested for an indictable offence, save in exceptional circumstances (for example they have failed to attend for interview following street bail or declined to attend on a voluntary basis having been given reasonable opportunity to do so).

It is **highly significant that the MPS have shown that an extendable 12-hour initial custody period for children is feasible and effective in two areas significantly impacted by child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence**. This evidence echoes the success of similar initiatives in other forces. Surrey Police, for example, having piloted an extendable 12-hour initial detention period, found the approach so effective that they have adopted it as 'business as usual'.³⁹ However without differentiation in legislation these local practices are liable to be lost in the face of resourcing challenges and competing policy priorities.

Recommendation 8: An extendable 12-hour initial detention period for children

That the Home Office introduce legislation and/or guidance limiting the initial detention period for children to 12 hours (with power to extend to 24 hours (and beyond) with senior officer authorisation).

³⁹ Vicky Kemp and Miranda Bevan (2025b) [Review of Child Centred Arrangements](#) – Including a 12-hour Clock for Children – Piloted by Surrey Police.

4.5 Legal advice

Mandatory legal advice for children

This evaluation provided the first opportunity for external assessment of the impact of the MPS' policy under CHILD to reverse the presumption of legal advice for children. Regrettably uptake of legal advice is not a mandatory field in CONNECT (the MPS police computer system) and so there is no electronic custody data to assess uptake across the MPS and across years. However, the hand-compiled data for the pilot and comparison suites does include uptake of legal advice (although not whether legal advice was in fact received).

Table 1: Uptake of legal advice by children by month

	Nov 24	Dec 24	Jan 25	Feb 25	Mar 25
Brixton	97%	93%	100%	95%	100%
Wood Green	92%	97%	97%	97%	95%
Bromley	100%	88%	95%	94%	100%
Wembley	100%	94%	95%	100%	96%

The findings indicate that the **CHILD reversal of the presumption of legal advice has had a very positive impact on uptake of legal advice by children, and that this has continued through the Child First Custody pilot**. There were no indications across the evidence that the Duty Solicitor Call Centre was unable to accommodate the increased numbers of requests in the MPS area, or that co-ordinating lawyer attendance for more cases was unmanageable for the suites. Nor were there any reports of children refusing to speak to representatives when they attended. It is hoped that this evidence will support legislative change to introduce mandatory legal advice for children in police custody.

Recommendation 9: Mandatory attendance of a lawyer for all children in police custody

That the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office introduce legislation to make attendance of a lawyer mandatory for all children in police custody. The child should only be able to waive representation in interview following advice from the lawyer (and where their appropriate adult agrees).

Low levels of child-specific training among lawyers

The lawyers who attended the training session were mostly very experienced practitioners, 80% having more than 8 years' experience. Having selected to attend a day's training on representing children, they were also likely to represent those of the profession who are more engaged with issues relating to children. However, even amongst this group, the level of prior training on key aspects relating to children was relatively low, particularly with regard to ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) and trauma (70% having 30 minutes or less formal training), neurodivergence (60% having 30 minutes or less formal training) and representing care

experienced children (57.5% having 30 minutes or less formal training). In survey responses and interviews the Child First-trained lawyers were very positive about the training, and particularly valued the segments on local diversionary approaches and on communicating effectively with children. The wider data suggests that this picture of minimal prior child-specific training may be representative, and that in many cases lawyers are not providing a service to their young clients which accommodates their youth and particular needs.

Early lawyer engagement

There was little evidence on the detention logs of the 'safety net' discussion having taken place (only 29 of 199 logs recording such a discussion). However, where it did take place, the review reveals that it could be extremely effective, as the following example illustrates:

Case example (Child 66.BRI): a child aged 15 was detained for two allegations of assault on police and criminal damage at 16:25. Due to aggression shown by the child the custody officer recorded that there was no option but to detain. The child was confirmed to have autism and there had been recent social care involvement. The child's father and the lawyer (not Child First-trained but from a Child First-involved firm) attended at approximately 17:30. A safety net discussion was held in which the lawyer made representations that the child should be bailed (there being no civilian victim and attendance on bail for interview being preferable). The child was bailed at 18:30 and returned on bail to be interviewed on another day as required.

Early telephone contact between lawyer and child was also extremely rarely recorded as having taken place (only 20 of the 199 logs reviewed recording such activity), despite the statutory requirement for this to occur within 45 minutes of receiving a police station instruction (known as the 'advice call').⁴⁰ Even allowing for likely significant under-recording, this is a low level of contact. A range of reasons emerged for this infrequency of early contact, including difficulty lawyers encountered getting through to the custody suite on the phone, detention officers being unable to facilitate the contact for logistical and resourcing reasons and the view of some lawyers that an initial conversation with a child in their cell through a speaker on the wall is less desirable than no contact at all.

The detention log review reveals that, almost without exception, lawyer attendance was timed so that they arrived shortly before the child's police interview. Inevitably not every lawyer's arrival or first contact with the child was identifiable on the detention logs. However where the lawyer's attendance was logged, in most cases this was within an hour of the child's police interview beginning, with the lawyer receiving disclosure from the officer in the case and then commencing their first consultation with the child commonly within 30 minutes of the interview beginning. Likewise, as noted above, there was very limited evidence of lawyer engagement at the point when the custody officer considers release, and issues of bail or remand.

This accords with children's reflections on legal advice to User Voice. Most children reported having their first contact with their lawyer in person, rather than by phone. Only just over half of the children who spoke to User Voice reported that they felt they could trust their lawyer (10 of 18). Communication was key to trust and positive experiences of legal advice: *"like he [the lawyer] spoke to me on a level, and he spoke to me like I was human and gave me respect, so I gave him my respect and trust back, and yes, he helped me."* (User Voice participant.WG).

⁴⁰ See paragraph 9.23 of the Legal Aid Agency 2022 [Standard Crime Contract Specification](#).

However, their accounts suggest that the absence of legal advice on release is problematic, with a number of children describing not understanding their bail conditions: *“I was just confused. I accidentally started breaking my conditions.”* (User Voice participant.WG).

The picture which emerges is of an essential support for children, but one which has become telescoped into a brief interval around the police interview. This appears, to a considerable degree, to be dictated by the limited legal aid fee available, there being insufficient funding to resource the challenging of detention authorisation, substantive early engagement with a child client, or representation at the point of release or remand. However, the result is a vestigial form of legal advice which is largely unadjusted to the needs of a very vulnerable child population.

Child-specialist lawyers

During the pilot it proved extremely difficult to match, through the general solicitor duty rota, the pool of Child First-trained lawyers with children in custody. During the detention log review period (13 November 2024 –31 January 2025) of the 199 children detained in the pilot suites, only **18** were attended in person by Child First-trained lawyers (**9.0% of cases**). In a further **15 cases (7.5%)** a Child First-trained lawyer was involved by telephone at an early stage but an untrained representative attended, or the representative attending was untrained, but was working for a firm which had a Child First-trained lawyer or lawyers (referred to here as a ‘Child First-linked’ lawyer). As a result the evidence obtained provides only a snapshot of the potential impact of child-specialist representation, and further investigation is required.

Nonetheless, **the wider data which is available makes a strong case for a broader pilot of a separate child-specialist duty solicitor rota, with additional funding.** During the pilot, the performance of Child First-trained and Child First-linked lawyers stood out in comparison to their untrained colleagues. Despite being instructed in less than 17% of cases, Child First trained/linked lawyers were over-represented in terms of holding effective safety-net conversations, in making telephone contact with the child early in the custody episode (in 10 of the 20 recorded advice calls), and making representations in relation to bail and/or remand (in 11 of the 17 recorded cases).

Overall the evidence tends to suggest **that Child First training for lawyers has a positive impact on the advice and assistance provided to child suspects**, either because the lawyer is more committed to their client and their needs, or their involvement prompts greater focus on the child’s needs by the custody team, or both. Early, specialist advice is not only beneficial for the child but promises the sort of streamlining of legal processes observed by Lord Bellamy KC to benefit the criminal justice process further ‘downstream’.⁴¹

The interview analysis further underlines the urgent need for child-specialist legal advice. In contrast to the treatment of child witnesses,⁴² child suspects are not required to be interviewed by police officers with specialist training in questioning children or vulnerable witnesses. The evidence of the interview review, and the accounts of children themselves, reveal real concerns about the accessibility and fairness of the police interview for children. For example, analysis of the 40 randomised interviews identified that the police caution (which details the child’s right of silence) was only fully and accurately explained in 5 interviews and

41 Sir Christopher Bellamy KC (2021) [Independent Review of Criminal Legal Aid](#).

42 Who are required to be interviewed by officers with specific training, in accordance with [Achieving Best Evidence](#) guidance.

partially explained in 20. Likewise, caution comprehension-checking was highly variable. In 7 of the 40 recorded interviews no check at all was made and in 19 interviews the officers simply asked, 'Do you understand?', eliciting a positive answer, but one which is likely to be unreliable without further checks.

Despite the high levels of additional vulnerability of the child suspects involved in the pilot, it was not possible on the review to identify any specific adjustment to accommodate children's distinct needs and capacities in police interview, and nor could any of the children who spoke to User Voice recall any particular accommodation. After the lawyer, the primary safeguard for a child in interview is the presence of an appropriate adult (AA). However AA interventions in the interviews reviewed were rare, and where family members acted as AAs (the majority of interviews) their interventions were more likely than not to be unhelpful or inappropriate. It is abundantly clear that additional support is required for children in police custody, and in interview in particular.

It is plain, however, given the challenges of matching child specialist lawyers to children's cases, that piloting a separate duty solicitor rota would be necessary to explore child-specialist legal representation further. It is also evident that the current structure of legal aid remuneration, even with the recent uplift, does not incentivise the changes required to ensure that children's legal rights are meaningfully enabled. During the pilot, the safety net conversation, and attendant phone calls required to enable this to occur meaningfully, were effectively being conducted on a pro bono basis. For child-specialist lawyers to be able to fulfil the duties expected of them under Child First, or any future pilot, an additional fee would need to be paid. Without such remuneration the extra work required by a child-specialist role is simply not likely to be manageable for lawyers and their firms.

Recommendation 10: Fully-funded pilot of a child specialist duty rota

That the Youth Justice Policy Department of the Ministry of Justice and the Legal Aid Agency commission and fund a pilot of a child specialist duty rota for 6 months in the two pilot suites, with an uplift in legal aid fee.

4.6 Support from partner agencies

At the point of arrest

During the pilot, frontline and custody teams managed complex situations arising in respect of extremely vulnerable children, often with almost no support from partner agencies. Social care (and particularly Emergency Duty Teams operating out of hours) were rarely able to assist frontline officers by providing alternative accommodation or support for children or families at the point when children came to police attention. In many cases, especially for children in the early stages of criminal behaviour (and commonly exploitation), detention in custody was often not strictly necessary for the purposes of investigation. Rather, frontline officers felt driven to arrest, and custody officers to detain, to keep children safe.

Where the child's detention is being considered because they themselves are at risk of serious harm (but their detention is not necessary for a criminal investigation) then the police should use their 'police protection' powers, under which they can detain a child for up to 72 hours until social care can take over (Children Act 1989 s46). The evidence revealed that these powers are very rarely used. Officers explained that the total lack of police facilities for children detained in those circumstances, and the delays in social care attending, meant that arresting and taking a child into custody was preferred, both because it was considered better for the child and because it was less resource-intensive for response teams. This is particularly troubling given that the detention log review suggests that approaching half of the children in custody were either currently 'looked after' by the local authority or subject to social care intervention.

The logs reveal that a high proportion of detained children were also well known to the police and thus most likely to YJS. However, again YJS had no routine engagement with officers to support arrest and detention decision-making by providing information in respect of a specific child known to their service or more general youth justice expertise.

In the custody suite

Information flows

Once the child is in custody, early contact with local authorities through Operation Harbinger checks (as part of CHILD) has certainly improved the information flow from social care into custody. However, the detention logs reveal that the quality of information received by the custody team is extremely variable and the process is cumbersome. Specialist liaison and diversion workers often did an excellent job of collating information about a child in custody, but only if the child consented and they were fortunate enough to be detained at a time when the worker was in the suite and available to see them. Even in those circumstances this information was often not received until deep into a custody episode. Likewise ENGAGE teams spoke to children detained during their daytime working hours, but their focus is on fostering the child's engagement with positive opportunities on release. Their role is not designed to provide information to custody and investigation teams, or to secure support to facilitate safe release. At the same time, AAs supporting children in police custody on behalf of the local authority tended to be volunteers, or secured through paid providers, and typically brought no youth justice expertise to bear on this early stage of the process, nor could they access detailed information held by the local authority about the child.

Safeguarding

As a result, although frontline officers often considered police custody a key space for safeguarding a child, in reality police custody was revealed as largely unsuited to that task. Although the authorities collectively hold a substantial amount of information about many of the children in custody, that information is not effectively accessed in custody in many cases. Instead the child in custody is burdened by being asked the same safeguarding questions by a wide range of different actors, typically non-specialist uniformed officers and police staff, few of whom have any expertise in engaging with children. Officers from specialist teams, such as exploitation or child protection teams, very rarely visit children in custody, despite many being flagged as at risk of exploitation (there is one such recorded attendance in the 199 logs reviewed). The detention log and police interview reviews reveal that, in the adversarial context

of police custody, children very rarely make positive disclosures,⁴³ and, having been detained officially for investigation, the focus is on processing them as criminal suspects.

There is an urgent need for better information-sharing and multi-agency, child-specialist working to safeguard children at the point of arrest and in police custody. This lack of multi-agency support and information-sharing contradicts expectations that safeguarding should be a shared responsibility across partner agencies. Whilst always careful not to criticise partner agencies, acknowledging their particular resourcing challenges, frontline and custody teams commonly expressed frustration at being left to manage these issues alone, and felt harshly scrutinised for wider system failings beyond their control.

Early diversion

The Child First checklist required the custody officer to encourage the investigating officers to consider diversion at the earliest opportunity, and to indicate to lawyers where the case was potentially suitable for an out-of-court resolution (OOCR). There is no evidence that these requirements had any impact on the offering or use of OOCRs. Although in statutory terms the consideration of disposals, including OOCRs, falls to the custody officer (s37(1) PACE and Code C note 16A), in practice in the MPS this decision is made by the evidential review officer (within the investigation team). As a result, custody officers expressed reluctance to get involved in encouraging consideration of diversion. Nor was there any evidence that the quality or content of disclosure had improved as a result of the Child First Custody Pilot project, particularly in terms of indication of the likely appropriateness of an OOCR, so that legal advice to children could be more tailored. Unsurprisingly, the frequency with which children answered all or most of the questions in police interview was low. The interview analysis provides only a snapshot, but across the 51 recorded interviews reviewed, the child made full or substantial comment in approximately one fifth (22%) of interviews and made no, or no substantial, comment in almost half (47%) of all interviews (the child providing a prepared statement and thereafter no comment in the remainder (31%) of interviews).

The rate at which children were charged during the pilot period in both Brixton and Wood Green showed no significant change from that in the earlier period, although there was a rise in the rate of charge in comparison sites. The outcomes data is incomplete and so the use of OOCRs cannot be accurately identified. However the numbers of children receiving an OOCR on release from custody, or whilst on bail or released under investigation (RUI), appear to be very low. The evidence of this study suggests that future efforts to increase the use of OOCRs should focus on early engagement of the YJS with police decision-makers, either frontline officers at the point of arrest or evidential review officers considering referral to the YJS. Many frontline and investigating officers expressed frustration at the delays between a child's arrest and interview, and their active engagement by the YJS following referral or prosecution. The earlier the YJS can be involved, and can support the decision to divert, the better.

⁴³ Similar challenges have been noted elsewhere: Hannah Marshall, *Child Criminal Exploitation and the Interactional Emergence of Victim Status* (2024) *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 64(5), p1011–1027.

The scale of child exploitation with which the MPS are faced in the two pilot areas, and the racial disproportionality observed in the group of children drawn into this world, make action urgent. This study reveals a pressing need for social care and YJS input at the point of arrest, both in terms of information-sharing and support. In particular there is a need for alternative spaces where children coming to attention of the police can be taken, when the needs of the investigation, and the risks the child presents, do not necessitate their detention in police custody. Ideally these spaces would enable supportive services to engage with the child in a non-police environment and for safeguarding to be explored in a non-adversarial setting. At the same time early youth justice intervention could facilitate engagement with preventive interventions without delay. Whilst appreciating that such changes would be fundamental, the authors believe that the MPS, and their partners in MOPAC and the London Violence Reduction Unit, are well-placed to lead change in this area. Such work would feed into the MPS' Children's Strategy and the Government's wider Safer Streets Mission.

Recommendation 11: Child First Steering Group

That the MPS and MOPAC convene a Child First Steering Group (reporting to the London Criminal Justice Board) to:

- explore mechanisms for improved information-sharing, multi-agency working, and provision of alternative accommodation at the point of a child coming to police attention, and,
- support and monitor progress in response to the report and its recommendations.

(The Steering Group should include: MOPAC, lawyers, the London Violence Reduction Unit, YJS representatives, the Association of YOT Managers, the Youth Justice Board, and representatives from Children's Services and local government.)

Recommendation 12: Further Research Study

That the Child First Steering Group commission a research study within the MPS (working closely with YJS, the association of YOT Managers, the NPCC, the YJB, and the MoJ Youth Justice Policy team) to pilot MPS access to 'on call' support during office hours from YJS.

(The intention would be for MPS frontline officers, investigating/evidential review officers and custody officers to have a clear line of communication with YJS, to be able to obtain information and guidance on likely outcomes, referral options, and alternative support for children at risk of being detained in police custody.)

5. Conclusion

The MPS are to be applauded for building on their progress under the CHILD initiative by implementing the more demanding Child First Custody Pilot. A key strength of the pilot has been that it has aimed to improve the treatment of children in custody by emphasising the rules and guidelines that are currently within PACE (and Code C). However, in so doing, the pilot has also helped to highlight limitations within that legal framework, particularly the lack of differentiation between the treatment of children and adults. Indeed many of the challenges for implementing Child First approaches that have been identified in this study are not peculiar to the MPS but are observed in other forces, underscored by resourcing issues encountered nationally and the inadequacy of a legal framework which seeks to address the complexities of youth crime within a rigidly adversarial process. The final report of the wider Nuffield Foundation funded project, [Children in Police Custody: Piloting a 'Child First' Approach](#) will bring together these area reports and recommendations. The rich seam of evidence generated by this pilot will support not just the enhancement of MPS approaches to children in custody, and the work of the wider MPS Children's Strategy, but will also contribute significantly to the identification of changes required to PACE and the Codes of Practice in achieving a Child First approach in police custody nationally.

Dr Miranda Bevan and Dr Vicky Kemp, April 2026

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