



South Wales Police: Child First in Practice - Frontline Policing and Custody Decision-Making

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July 2026



The University of
Nottingham

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Nuffield Foundation Grant No. FR-000023806

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This report forms part of the Nuffield Foundation-funded project, *Children and Policing in England and Wales: Adopting a Child First Approach*. Further project outputs, including related reports and resources, are available via the [Nuffield Foundation project webpage](#).

Front cover design by Reality Art.

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Glossary

AA – Appropriate Adult
ABE – Achieving Best Evidence
ACEs – Adverse Childhood Experiences
APP – Authorised Professional Practice
BWV – Body-worn video
CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CCE – Child Criminal Exploitation
CSE – Child Sexual Exploitation
DBS – Disclosure and Barring Service
EDT – Emergency Duty Team
HCP – Healthcare Professional
HMICFRS – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services
LASPO – Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012
MASH – Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
NFA – No further action
NPCC – National Police Chiefs’ Council
NYAS – National Youth Advocacy Service
OOCR – Out-of-court resolution
PACE – Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984
PCSO – Police Community Support Officer
PPN – Public Protection Notice
RCRP – Right Care, Right Person
RJ – Restorative justice
SWP – South Wales Police
UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
VA – Voluntary Attendance
YJB – Youth Justice Board
YJS – Youth Justice Service / Youth Offending Service / Youth Offending Team

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Executive Summary

This report examines South Wales Police's (SWP) engagement with children through a Child First lens. Child First approaches require children to be treated as children, accommodating their distinct needs and capacities, ensuring their rights are realised and their participation enabled. The emphasis is on prevention, minimum intervention and diversion from formal criminal justice processes wherever appropriate. The report reviews frontline encounters, decision-making at the point of arrest, diversion and out-of-court resolutions, welfare and preventative work, and the treatment of children in police custody.

About this study

This report forms part of the Nuffield Foundation-funded research programme *Children and Policing in England and Wales: Adopting a Child First Approach*, which examined the adoption of Child First approaches across frontline policing and police custody in England and Wales. SWP participated in both strands of the research programme: a review of frontline officers' interactions with children and an examination of efforts to develop a more child-centred approach in police custody. Bringing these strands together, this report offers a unique insight into how SWP engages with children across the policing process, from early encounters with frontline officers to detention in police custody. In doing so, it examines not only children's experiences in custody, but also the earlier decisions and interactions that shape their progression through, or diversion from, the formal criminal justice process.

Fieldwork, between July and November 2025, involved observations with response and neighbourhood policing teams, interviews with frontline officers, specialist police units and partner agencies, observations in police custody, and interviews with custody staff and healthcare professionals. This was supplemented by a review of body-worn video footage of stop and search incidents and analysis of SWP custody record data for a three-year period.

The study took place during a period of significant change. Following the 2023 HMICFRS inspection of custody services, SWP introduced a range of reforms aimed at strengthening decision-making, reducing unnecessary detention and improving children's experiences in custody. This provided a valuable opportunity not only to identify areas for further development but also to assess the impact of changes already implemented.

The report makes a series of recommendations designed to support the further development of Child First policing across both frontline and custody practice. Several of these recommendations have already been adopted, or are in the process of being implemented, including plans by SWP to pilot a 12-hour detention clock for children and to develop a more explicit Child First framework for police custody.

Overall findings

The findings present a positive picture of a force that is already demonstrating many of the characteristics associated with child-centred and Child First practice. Officers frequently displayed empathy, professionalism and a genuine commitment to doing their best for children. Across both frontline policing and custody, there was evidence of a strong commitment to safeguarding, prevention and supporting positive outcomes for children.

Importantly, SWP has responded seriously to external scrutiny and has already introduced a number of reforms designed to reduce children's involvement in the criminal justice system and minimise the use of police custody. These changes are beginning to produce measurable results, particularly in relation to the scrutiny and use of detention for children.

At the same time, the study identifies opportunities to strengthen and embed Child First approaches more consistently across the organisation. The principal challenge is not a lack of commitment by officers and staff, but the absence of a clearly articulated Child First framework, supported by training, operational guidance and stronger multi-agency arrangements.

Frontline policing

Neighbourhood teams, particularly PCSOs, demonstrated strong examples of relationship-based and preventative work with children and families. Response officers frequently encountered children in challenging and high-pressure situations and often showed considerable skill in managing those encounters. However, practice was inconsistent and largely dependent on individual experience rather than structured training. The inexperience of frontline teams was a notable issue, as it is nationally.

A review of body-worn video footage identified many examples of positive communication during stop and search encounters, alongside areas requiring improvement, including the use of handcuffs, communication of rights, and the collection of self-reported ethnicity data.

Officers showed a strong appetite for child-specific training and support. While many officers described approaches that aligned with Child First principles, awareness of specific Child First or child-centred policing approaches was extremely limited.

Arrest, diversion and alternatives to custody

The study found evidence of a significant cultural shift in SWP's approach to children entering custody. Strengthened custody gatekeeping arrangements and increased supervisory scrutiny have encouraged more robust decision-making and greater consideration of alternatives to arrest and detention.

Nevertheless, uncertainty remains among some frontline officers regarding the use of alternatives such as voluntary attendance, street bail and informal diversion. Domestic abuse incidents involving 16- and 17-year-olds were identified as a particular area where arrest was often treated as the default response, risking unnecessary criminalisation.

Diversion is widely supported across the force and by partner agencies, and the involvement of youth justice practitioners in decision-making was identified as a notable strength. However, some barriers to effective diversion remain, including inconsistencies in guidance and terminology, lack of support and information from partner agencies at the point of arrest, and limited knowledge of diversion options on the frontline, arising in part from referral processes with minimal feedback mechanisms. Several of these barriers reflect wider national issues rather than matters specific to SWP.

Welfare and prevention

A major finding of the study is that the majority of police interactions with children arise from scenarios more appropriately characterised as welfare concerns rather than criminal

behaviour. Officers frequently described acting as the default response to unmet needs which are more properly the remit of social care, mental health and children's services. This was particularly the case outside normal working hours.

SWP has developed strong specialist arrangements in areas such as missing children, exploitation and safeguarding. However, the absence of sufficient out-of-hours support from partner agencies creates risks that vulnerable children are drawn unnecessarily into criminal justice processes.

Police custody

The study identified significant progress within custody following the 2023 HMICFRS inspection. Children are now prioritised at booking-in, receive earlier oversight from inspectors, and are routinely seen by healthcare professionals. Authorisation of detention decisions for children is now subject to more robust scrutiny regarding whether detention is necessary.

Custody record data indicate a reduction in child detentions alongside an increase in detention refusals, suggesting that recent changes are strengthening scrutiny of children's detention and may be influencing decision-making at an earlier stage.

Despite these improvements, important gaps remain. Mental health provision for children in custody is limited, information-sharing between agencies is inconsistent, appropriate adult provision outside office hours remains problematic, and statutory partners are often absent from the custody environment.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that SWP is well placed to build on the progress already made and further align policing practice with the child-centred and rights-based approach that characterises public services in Wales. Building on the reforms already implemented, SWP's commitment to piloting a 12-hour detention clock and developing an overarching Child First framework for children in custody provides an opportunity to further embed these principles across frontline and custody practice, while helping to shape a more coherent approach to child-centred policing in Wales.

The recommendations set out in this report are intended to build on that progress by increasing the availability and use of alternatives to custody, strengthening officer confidence and decision-making, improving multi-agency support, and ensuring that children are treated as children at every stage of their interaction with the police.

Taken together, they offer a practical roadmap for embedding Child First policing in SWP and supporting the wider development of child-centred policing across Wales.

Related publications and resources

All the reports arising from the wider Nuffield Foundation-funded research programme *Children and Policing in England and Wales: Adopting a Child First Approach* are available via the [Nuffield Foundation project webpage](#). These include an overarching *Summary Report and Recommendations*, together with the related reports on frontline policing, police custody reform and children's custody records. The accompanying *Child First Custody Toolkit* provides practical resources to support implementation of Child First approaches in practice.

Key recommendations

The report contains 23 recommendations designed to support SWP in further developing and embedding a Child First approach across frontline and custody practice. The key recommendations and areas they address are summarised below.

Embedding Child First Practice (recommendations 1-2, 23)

- Introduce Child First training for all officers and staff who come into contact with children.
- Embed Child First principles within strategic planning and operational practice.
- Develop an overarching Child First framework for police custody.

Improving Frontline Engagement with Children (recommendations 3-5)

- Strengthen guidance and training relating to stop and search involving children.
- Introduce more accessible information for children at the conclusion of stop and search encounters.
- Maintain and expand opportunities for young people to contribute to scrutiny and accountability processes.

Strengthening Arrest Decision-Making (recommendations 6-10)

- Produce clear operational guidance for frontline officers on using less intrusive approaches at the point of arrest, including a decision-making flowchart.
- Introduce supervisory oversight of decisions to arrest children before bringing them into custody.
- Review domestic abuse positive action policy in relation to children to ensure that arrest is not applied automatically.

Improving Diversion and Out-of-Court Resolutions (recommendations 11-14)

- Work with YJS partners to agree clear and consistent guidance on the use of out-of-court resolutions (OOCRs) for frontline officers.
- Work with YJS partners to improve frontline officer access to youth justice specialist advice and information at the point of arrest and when making diversionary decisions.
- Work with YJS partners to reduce referral timescales and introduce a fast-track referral pathway for low-level offending.
- Improve feedback mechanisms following referral for an OOCR to develop frontline officers' understanding of diversionary outcomes.

Strengthening Multi-Agency Welfare Responses (recommendations 15-16)

- Work with local authorities and healthcare providers to agree a child-specific protocol for attendance, support and information-exchange at welfare-specific calls.
- Strengthen learning and collaboration between the frontline, specialist policing teams and partner agencies through secondment, shift-shadowing and short on-shift briefings.

Reducing the Use and Impact of Custody (recommendations 17-22)

- Pilot a 12-hour detention clock for children, with extension to 24 hours with senior officer approval.
- Strengthen the presumption against detention at the point of authorisation, favouring the use of voluntary attendance or short bail unless detention is identified as strictly necessary.
- Work with healthcare providers to establish a formal referral pathway from police custody into Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) where required.
- Work with partners to ensure that all healthcare workers in custody have had child-specific training and use child-specific assessment tools.
- Work with partners to improve liaison with children's services and YJS, and attendance, where appropriate, of allocated social workers and members of specialist policing teams to support safeguarding and reduce unnecessary detention.
- Work with YJS partners to ensure that AA provision for children is consistently available around the clock and is fit for purpose.

1. Introduction

‘Child First’ is now the guiding principle shaping how children who are suspected of offending are understood and responded to across youth justice in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board 2022). It places children’s needs, rights and long-term welfare at the centre of decision-making, treating them as children first and foremost.

This report forms part of the Nuffield Foundation-funded research programme, *Children and Policing in England and Wales: Adopting a Child First Approach*. It examines South Wales Police’s (SWP) frontline officers’ encounters with children, including during stop and search, and their decision-making at the point of arrest. It then reviews child-specific practices in custody and their effectiveness in addressing the needs, and realising the rights, of children in detention. Throughout, the analysis considers the extent to which Child First principles are reflected in practice.¹

Child First in policing

Haines and Drakeford (1998) first articulated the Child First principle as a direct challenge to increasingly risk-focused, offender-based approaches that had come to dominate youth justice. Case and Browning (2021) subsequently consolidated the evidence base, presenting a framework that treats children as children, prioritising their best interests and recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential. The approach emphasises developing children’s pro-social identity, working in a future-focused and relationship-based way, encouraging children’s active participation in decisions that affect them, and supporting their diversion away from the justice system wherever appropriate.

Research consistently shows that arrest and formal involvement in the justice system are more likely to increase than prevent offending (McAra and McVie 2007; Smith 2025), and that police detention can be particularly damaging for children (Bevan 2024). Greater understanding of adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed approaches is encouraging forces to adopt more child-centred policies (Kemp and others 2023).

The National Police Chiefs’ Council’s (NPCC 2024) *Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy 2024–2027* recognises that all under-18s must be treated as children, respecting their needs, vulnerabilities and diversity irrespective of assumed maturity. The NPCC’s *Children and Young Persons Policing Charter* (2025a) reinforces this through specific pledges on embedding child-centred practice, promoting diversion, ensuring relevant staff receive trauma-informed training, and delivering a child-centred custody experience. Together these frameworks establish clear expectations for how forces should engage with children. However, at present Child First has yet to be embedded in policing practice, in contrast to later stages of the youth justice system (Kemp and others 2023).

Child First in Wales

Child First has its roots in Wales, and it is here that rights-based and child-centred approaches have been adopted in public services. The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 places a duty on Welsh Ministers to have due regard to the United

¹ The wider project outputs, including the overarching *Summary Report and Recommendations*, the related reports on frontline policing, police custody reform and children’s custody records, and the accompanying *Child First Custody Toolkit*, are available via the [Nuffield Foundation project webpage](#).

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in all their functions, a commitment strengthened by its incorporation into Welsh law in 2022. The Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 together embed a preventative, person-centred ethos that places children's long-term welfare at the heart of public service delivery.

The Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales (Welsh Government and Ministry of Justice 2019) takes an explicitly Child First approach, committing to a youth justice system that is child-centred (rather than service-focused), trauma-informed, and responsive to children's individual needs and best interests.

Yet despite Wales's leadership in child welfare policy, policing and youth justice remain reserved matters so that SWP operates within a national policing framework. This creates a structural tension at the heart of everyday practice: the agencies working alongside police when they encounter a child, including social workers, health professionals and education staff, are shaped by Welsh legislation and a policy culture committed to prevention, trauma-informed practice and children's rights, while the police themselves are not. Whether that disconnect matters in practice, and how frontline officers navigate it, is one of the central questions this study addresses. The findings suggest it matters considerably: where police operate without meaningful engagement with partner agencies, children risk being drawn into formal criminal processes before social care and youth justice services (YJS) have had any opportunity to intervene. By the time these partner agencies become involved, the child may already be firmly within an adversarial system, a trajectory that is difficult to reconcile with Child First principles.

Policing children: the national picture

The national picture on child arrests across England and Wales is an important backdrop to this study. Over the ten years to March 2020, child arrest rates fell by 74%, driven partly by the shift towards voluntary interviews outside custody following the 2008 financial crisis (Kemp 2020; Youth Justice Board/Ministry of Justice 2021). This long-term reduction reflects a significant shift in how children are dealt with across the justice system. Rates then increased - by 7% in the year ending March 2022 and a further 9% in the year ending March 2023 - before flatlining in the year ending March 2024 and falling by 2% in the year ending March 2025, leaving the overall downward trend broadly intact (Youth Justice Board 2023-2026).

Regional variation within this national picture is considerable. While some areas saw sharp decreases in the year ending March 2024 (London fell by 22%), others saw significant increases, with the West Midlands up 19% and all other regions increasing between 1% and 11%. Wales recorded an 11% increase in child arrests in a year when the national total was effectively flat, the second highest regional increase nationally (Youth Justice Board 2025). SWP accounts for almost half of all child arrests in Wales, making it a particularly significant case study for examining Child First approaches in a Welsh context.

A second important contextual factor is the significant change in the frontline workforce over the same period. Cuts to policing budgets from 2012 led to around 20,000 experienced officers leaving policing. Combined with the 2019 government's manifesto commitment to

recruit 20,000 new officers, this created nationally a predominantly young-in-service frontline workforce with ongoing challenges around recruitment and retention (Home Office 2023). Most newly recruited officers are deployed first to response roles, and response teams continue to experience high turnover as officers seek specialist roles. Neighbourhood teams, which typically avoid night shifts, attract older and more experienced officers (Kemp and Bevan 2025a). The Government's '[Safer Streets Mission](#)' is increasing neighbourhood officer numbers, which, while welcome, will further deplete the pool of experienced officers available for response duties. These workforce dynamics have a direct bearing on how decisions about children are made and are a recurring thread throughout this report.

2. Aims of the research and structure of the report

This report examines SWP's engagement with children they encounter as potential suspects, and with children who come to police attention for welfare reasons, through a Child First lens. It considers, in particular, whether children are treated as children, whether their individual needs and capacities are accommodated, whether they are enabled to participate and exercise their rights, and whether diversion from court, and out of the justice process altogether, is pursued wherever appropriate.

SWP's willingness to participate in this study is significant both locally and for Wales as a whole. In the context of the clear direction of travel set out in the Youth Justice Blueprint, scrutiny of frontline policing practice offers an important opportunity to consider whether, and how, policing in Wales can be brought into alignment with the child-centred, rights-based and trauma-informed ethos that now characterises wider Welsh public services.

The research took place during a period of change: following a critical HMICFRS (2023) inspection of SWP custody suites, the force made changes to custody practice, including improving gatekeeping decisions when children first arrive in custody. This had implications for frontline policing, particularly in requiring officers to pursue alternatives to arrest and detention. A central aim of the study is to assess whether recent changes in SWP practice represent progress towards a Child First approach, and what further development is needed to embed it fully across both frontline and custody practice.

The report covers five areas: frontline officers' initial interactions with children; decision-making around alternatives to arrest; knowledge of out-of-court resolutions and community support; social welfare and preventative approaches; and the child-specific measures in police custody. Findings are presented in two parts, frontline engagement and custody, with recommendations for change where appropriate. While the findings are drawn from SWP, many of the issues identified reflect national challenges, and many of the recommendations will have relevance beyond Wales.

3. Methods and data

This is a mixed-methods study combining qualitative fieldwork with quantitative custody data analysis.

The qualitative fieldwork comprised two phases. Frontline observations took place in summer 2025 across two policing districts in Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan. Fieldwork

was undertaken in two broad locality groupings: Roath/Cathays and Penarth/Cardiff Bay, referred to in this report as Area 1 and Area 2, respectively. This comprised 13 frontline shifts between 28 July and 30 August 2025. Custody observations took place in November 2025 at an SWP custody suite, involving four shifts between 2 and 5 November 2025.

In total, 82 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 45 with frontline officers across response and neighbourhood teams (7 police community support officers, 31 police constables, 6 sergeants, 1 inspector); 16 with specialist policing teams and partner agencies including child protection, exploitation, missing persons, YJS, Early Help and youth workers; and 21 with custody staff and practitioners including 3 inspectors, 7 custody officers, 6 custody detention officers, 4 healthcare professionals and a mental health nurse.

Interview codes consist of a location code, followed by a role abbreviation and a number. For example, 1.PC1 denotes a police constable in Area 1, while 2.NSgt1 denotes a neighbourhood sergeant in Area 2. Custody codes follow the same format but omit the area designation.

Body-worn video footage from 40 stop and search incidents (20 in each area) was reviewed, selected chronologically from January to October 2025. The sample involved 56 children: 50 boys and 6 girls, predominantly aged 16 or 17. Of the 56 children, 41 were officer-identified as White, 8 as Black, 5 as Asian and 2 as Mixed Race.

The quantitative analysis drew on SWP custody record data covering 2023, 2024 and 2025. Dr Hope Kent, University of Nottingham, was responsible for carrying out the analysis. These data were used to examine trends in child detention, detention refusals, outcomes and other custody-related indicators.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Nottingham Research Ethics Committee. All participation was voluntary, and interview recordings were transcribed and all data were coded thematically using NVivo.

The analysis also draws on the HMICFRS (2023) inspection report of SWP custody suites and the HMICFRS (2024) PEEL inspection report, which provides an assessment of SWP's effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy across a range of policing functions, including stop and search.

Neighbourhood and response officers: contrasting approaches

Clear differences were observed between neighbourhood and response policing, with important implications for the delivery of a consistent Child First approach.

Neighbourhood officers, particularly PCSOs, were generally well-positioned to engage with children in a proactive and relational way. As a neighbourhood sergeant put it: "We want our PCSOs to continue having a great relationship with the community" (2.NSgt1). Regular contact with communities enabled officers to build familiarity with individual children and families, and to develop confidence in using referral pathways such as Early Help, through which support could be offered not only to the child but also, where needed, to their family. Preventative work was taken seriously, and in some cases, officers undertook sustained efforts to build trust, including regular visits to a children's home and participation in community events. This reflects the type of relational, future-focused engagement that Child

First principles emphasise. At the same time, such contact requires careful planning, particularly as police presence in a looked after child's life carries risks as well as benefits (Howard League 2017). Training and thoughtful preparation are needed to ensure that relationship-building achieves its aim without unintended consequences for the children involved.

There was some variation within neighbourhood teams, particularly in relation to warranted officers rather than PCSOs. In one area, officers described and displayed a proactive approach to disrupting local drug markets that made little apparent distinction between children and adults. This sat in real tension with the relationship-building and preventive work being carried out by the same team. More coercive activity may well be necessary and effective in some circumstances, but it risks undermining the trust that Child First approaches depend on.

Response officers' engagement with children was more strained, reflecting the pressures of the role. Encounters typically arose from grade 1 calls in tense situations, leaving little space for relationship-building. Some response officers showed real skill and empathy, adjusting their communication style and approach thoughtfully for children of different ages, but practice was significantly inconsistent. The key factor driving this inconsistency was not officer disposition but the absence of child-specific training: officers fell back on personal experience, meaning those with parenting backgrounds or prior work with children were more confident and adaptable, while those without such experience expressed genuine uncertainty. Without an understanding of children's natural developmental immaturity, neurodiversity, and trauma-informed approaches, officers can misread children's behaviour, find group encounters difficult to manage, and risk escalating situations that might otherwise have been resolved without formal action.

Some cultural attitudes also require challenge through training. The belief that arrest and a short period in custody constitute an appropriate punitive response to low-level offending by children was expressed by some officers, despite evidence that custody can increase rather than reduce reoffending (McAra and McVie 2010) and may itself be experienced as harmful and traumatic (Bevan 2022). These officers were commonly well-intentioned, and many genuinely did not want to criminalise children. However, there is a gap in professional knowledge that training needs to address. Embedding Child First principles in frontline training, particularly the evidence of their effectiveness in reducing reoffending, is therefore a prerequisite for meaningful change.

4. Frontline officers' engagement with children in the community

Frontline observations, interviews, and body-worn video (BWV) review indicate that SWP officers are frequently required to engage with children in complex and often high-pressure situations. Across these encounters, many officers demonstrated strong interpersonal skills, including the use of calm communication, informal language, and de-escalation techniques. However, the consistency with which child-centred approaches were applied varied, reflecting differences in role, experience and, most significantly, the level of structured support available to officers.

Stop and search: patterns emerging from the body-worn video footage review

SWP has significantly reduced its use of stop and search in recent years, with searches falling by 39% in the year ending March 2022 and by a further 28% in the year ending March 2023 (HMICFRS 2024).

The BWV review offers a broadly positive picture alongside areas for development. The majority of officers were polite, calm and professional. Many used accessible, informal language to reduce intimidation, explained the search process as it proceeded, and showed genuine skill in de-escalation, including in difficult situations, which demonstrates the potential for consistent Child First practice in stop and search.

Areas requiring attention were also highlighted. Handcuffs were used in 52% of searches reviewed, with children searched alone significantly more likely to be handcuffed than those searched in groups. Several children complained of discomfort, and in a number of cases cuffs remained in place beyond the point at which any risk had been established, including following negative searches, even where children were fully cooperative and compliant. This raises questions about individualised risk assessment, proportionality and whether officers were actively reassessing the need for continued restraint. The requirement for more thorough searches involving the removal of clothing to be conducted by an officer of the same sex (and out of public view) (Code A, 3.6) was also not always observed.

The requirement to ask children about their self-defined ethnicity was almost entirely overlooked, raising concerns about the accuracy of the ethnicity data that underpins monitoring of disproportionality. This is a significant issue given that Black people in South Wales are 3.1 times more likely to be stopped and searched than White people (HMICFRS 2024). The provision of information about rights and search records, while present in most cases, was rarely delivered in a genuinely child-friendly way, nor was the child's right to complain explained in a way likely to enable its exercise. These are not primarily failures of individual officers; they reflect the absence of consistent child-specific guidance and training embedded in everyday practice.

SWP has developed a range of accountability mechanisms around stop and search, including electronic recording via the iPatrol app, sergeant review of each search record, and inspector scrutiny of every search involving a person from an ethnic minority background. The involvement of children and young people in reviewing footage through 'young voices' groups represents a particularly positive development, giving children a direct voice in shaping how officers interact with them (HMICFRS 2024). Supervisors themselves placed clear emphasis on the quality of officer communication with the public. As one neighbourhood sergeant remarked: "My biggest thing is communication ... it's important that they give a good impression, have a good interaction, explain what's happening in plain English" (1.NSgt1). This infrastructure provides a strong foundation for improvement.

Awareness of Child First principles and training gaps

Officers and supervisors across SWP described an approach to children that seemed to be more relationship-oriented than that observed in the English forces participating in the wider study. Several officers articulated this explicitly, and it was visible in observed practice, particularly among neighbourhood teams. As one response officer put it: "We do naturally

think about the child first and what is appropriate" (2.PC17). While this is an encouraging foundation, none of the response officers spoken to, and only one neighbourhood officer, had heard of Child First or child-centred policing as a concept. This finding is consistent with other forces in the wider research project, where awareness of Child First principles among frontline officers was similarly limited (Kemp and Bevan 2026a), underlining a significant gap.

However well-intentioned, officers cannot consistently apply principles they are not aware of. As one officer put it plainly: "There should be training for us on how to deal with them [children]" (2.PC1). The appetite for such child-specific training was genuine and widely expressed across teams, and addressing this gap is a prerequisite for Child First principles to be meaningfully realised in frontline practice. The more relationship-oriented approach observed in SWP is consistent with the broader Welsh policy context, where Child First principles are embedded across public services. The cultural conditions for embedding Child First in policing may therefore be more developed in Wales than elsewhere, though these principles have yet to be translated into formal training and practice.

Recommendations

The absence of Child First training across frontline teams was the single most significant gap identified in this study. Officers cannot consistently apply principles they have not been introduced to, and the evidence strongly suggests that child-specific training would make an important difference to frontline practice.

Recommendation 1: All officers and staff in contact with children should receive training, regularly refreshed, on Child First approaches, including: what Child First means and the evidence base for its effectiveness; children's natural developmental immaturity, including the impact of peer presence on behaviour; ACEs and trauma-informed approaches; neurodiversity and its behavioural presentations; communicating effectively with children; child-specific de-escalation and restraint techniques; disproportionality and unconscious bias; and the importance and effectiveness of minimum intervention and diversion. Training should be in-person, include multi-disciplinary inputs, and incorporate the voices of children with experience of policing.

Recommendation 2: Child First principles should be embedded explicitly in SWP's overarching strategic planning documents, ensuring they are reflected consistently from senior leadership to the frontline.

The BWV review identified inconsistency in how stop and search powers were exercised with children, suggesting a need for clearer child-specific expectations and stronger learning from practice.

Recommendation 3: SWP should develop specific guidance for officers on conducting stop and search of children, covering proportionality, child-appropriate communication of rights, individualised risk assessment for the application and removal of handcuffs, same-sex search requirements for more thorough searches, and the collection of self-defined ethnicity data. Compliance should be actively monitored and good practice used as a learning tool across teams.

The end of a stop and search encounter is an important opportunity to reinforce children's understanding of what has happened and what options are available to them afterwards.

Recommendation 4: SWP should explore introducing more accessible information for children at the conclusion of a stop and search encounter. This could be by way of a QR code or physical card to reinforce their rights, access a copy of the stop and search record, and enable feedback or complaints.

Children and young people's involvement in reviewing BWV footage through stop and search scrutiny panels was identified as a positive development and a meaningful expression of Child First principles.

Recommendation 5: Children and young people's involvement in stop and search scrutiny panels should be maintained and expanded as a practical accountability mechanism.

5. Officers' decision-making and alternatives to arrest

The power of arrest is available to all police officers, and it is essential that they are able to invoke that power immediately where required. However, against a backdrop of a general decline in child arrest numbers, and with so many newly recruited officers in response teams, it is important to consider the quality of decisions to arrest children. Additionally, when SWP's custody suites were inspected in 2023, concerns were raised over the consistency and robustness of decision-making when authorising children's detention, with some cases identified that might have been more appropriately dealt with away from police custody (HMICFRS 2023:31). SWP responded by strengthening the gatekeeping role of custody officers and introducing early inspector reviews of children's detention, enabling inspectors to scrutinise decisions and challenge whether continued detention is necessary. These developments are significant and broadly positive, and their effects were visible throughout the fieldwork. Their impact on custody practice is considered further below.

Factors driving arrest

Frontline officers generally reported not feeling under explicit pressure to arrest children, and no formal targets existed. In practice, however, arrest activity was visible to senior leaders and some officers were conscious of this. The pressure observed was low-level and informal rather than target-driven, notably different from other forces in the wider study where officers described institutional expectations to arrest as a default form of positive action. That children were not treated as targets to boost arrest statistics is, in itself, a significant finding.

Other factors driving arrest were more structural. Arrest confers investigative powers, including search, seizure of phones, and the ability to impose bail conditions, which are not easily available through other means. Some officers used arrest partly as a mechanism for managing risk, reasoning that if a custody officer then refused detention, responsibility shifted to them. These dynamics point to questions about whether officers have sufficient training to use the full range of their investigative powers, and whether risk-averse cultures can be addressed through clearer guidance and supervisory support.

The domestic abuse context created particular pressure. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 placed on a statutory footing for the first time a definition of domestic abuse that includes

16- and 17-year-olds as potential perpetrators, and the requirement for positive action is typically interpreted by frontline officers as mandating arrest as the default response. SWP's positive action policy reflects this national framework, prioritising safeguarding and requiring officers to take action against suspects even where victims do not wish to make a statement.

While the intention is to protect victims, in SWP this has produced an almost automatic arrest response regardless of the seriousness of the incident or the individual circumstances of the child. Officers described cases where children had been arrested for pushing past a parent during an argument, or for breaking a window. As one officer described:

From the age of 16 years, we'll arrest a child for DV [domestic violence] because it's force policy. This includes cases where we know it's not going anywhere. It can be a first-time low-level offence and there's no evidence but we're under pressure to take positive action and that means arrest (2.PC7).

Several officers acknowledged feeling that arrest in domestic abuse circumstances had become automatic, something done 'by rote' (1.PC2), rather than the result of considered judgement.

Children with neurodivergent conditions or learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable to being drawn inappropriately into the criminal justice system through this route. Clearer guidance, stronger supervisory oversight, and earlier engagement of partner agencies are all needed to ensure that the policy achieves its protective purpose without unnecessary criminalisation of children.

Knife possession generated strong views among officers, with some treating custody as an automatic response to any child found in possession of a knife. While the seriousness of knife crime is not in question, a blanket approach risks overriding the individualised assessment that the law requires. Government guidance published in February 2026 sets out a clear expectation that knife possession offences should be responded to swiftly but through a structured, evidence-based process involving YJS consultation and individualised assessment. The guidance also recognises that deferred prosecution is available as a non-criminalising option in appropriate cases (Home Office/Ministry of Justice 2026). While arrest will often be appropriate, it is not always necessary for a swift and effective investigation to proceed. Even for serious offences involving children, there remains a duty to consider alternatives to detention, taking into account the child's welfare, their offending history, and whether the objectives of arrest and investigation could be met through less restrictive means. The Child Gravity Matrix (NPCC 2025b) exists precisely to support this kind of nuanced decision-making and officers need to be familiar with both it and the new guidance.

Strengthening custody gatekeeping decisions

The more robust approach taken by custody officers in authorising detention for children was widely felt on the frontline and has contributed to a meaningful cultural shift. Many officers welcomed it. The view that pursuing an investigation does not always mean arrest was widely expressed across teams. Research evidence supports this direction: custody can be traumatic for children and is associated with increased rather than reduced reoffending, including for first-time low-level offenders (McAra and McVie 2007; Smith 2025).

The shift has not been uniform. Some officers viewed custody's more challenging stance when refusing detention as an inappropriate interpretation of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE) 1984, and the approach taken by individual custody officers was not always consistent, creating frustration for frontline teams. There were also competing pressures: while custody wanted fewer children in cells, some frontline supervisors still equated positive action with arrest. Resolving this tension requires clearer and more consistent messaging from senior leadership about what constitutes appropriate action when dealing with children.

Alternatives to detention: street bail and voluntary attendance

While frontline officers had received the message that custody would increasingly refuse children unless detention was a necessity, many reported uncertainty about alternatives to custody. As one PC explained of refusals to authorise detention: "It's really difficult for response because it raises questions about what they're supposed to do with them instead" (1.PC5).

Street bail (PACE s30A) enables an officer to arrest, exercise powers linked to arrest and impose bail conditions, but without detaining the child. However, it was rarely used in practice. Some officers recognised its value: "I'm a massive advocate for it but it's not used enough" (2.PC7). Others reported almost never using it: "We don't use street bail. The only time I've used that is where someone is going to be delayed in hospital. We don't get much training on that power" (1.PC3). The lack of training is a key issue. Most officers had not heard of street bail, and supervisors acknowledged that confusion existed about the difference between street bail and voluntary attendance. This is not unique to SWP and has been observed in other force areas (Kemp and Bevan 2026a). Clearer guidance and training would make a practical difference. The College of Policing's (2022) Authorised Professional Practice (APP) on Response, Arrest and Detention includes a section on release before arrival at a police station, or street bail, but that section has not been updated to reflect the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and is expressly marked as no longer accurate for arrests made on or after 28 October 2022. The APP should therefore be updated to provide clear guidance on the use of release before arrival at custody in cases involving children, including where a parent or carer is present and able to act as an appropriate adult at the point of release.

Voluntary attendance (VA) is intended to provide a less coercive alternative to custody when it is necessary to question a child under caution. From a Child First perspective it offers significant advantages, in terms of enabling the child to be interviewed in less stressful circumstances, enabling optimal appropriate adult support and the opportunity to receive free legal advice (and any other necessary support) without pressure of time. VA arrangements in SWP are better developed than in other forces in the study, with a centralised booking system, a dedicated VA sergeant, full risk assessment, and access to legal advice.

In practice, however, VA does not appear to be used as routinely as it could be. Scheduling difficulties, lawyer availability, and concerns that children may fail to attend all create barriers. Lack of knowledge also played a role, disincentivising the use of VA even in cases where that would have been the appropriate and least intrusive option. Some officers

believed that they may not have a power to arrest if a child failed to attend a VA, although PACE Code G Note 2F makes plain this is not the case. Some other inexperienced officers were uncertain as to when VA could be used and whether its use was restricted to minor offences. Workload pressures added a further complication. Unlike many forces, SWP frontline officers carry their own caseloads, meaning the administrative demands of a custody case fall directly on the arresting officer. Where a no-further-action outcome seemed likely, some officers chose not to arrest in order to avoid that burden, but they did not opt for VA as an alternative either. While choosing not to arrest may well be the right outcome, it is important that decisions are actively grounded in the child's best interests and the needs of the investigation, rather than driven primarily by workload considerations. It is essential that officers engage with less intrusive approaches to investigation where required, and refer children for support where investigation is not needed.

The role of supervisors

Early morning reviews of child arrests by inspectors and sergeants represent a welcome development, as does the practice of YJS officers conducting daily checks during weekdays on any children brought into custody. Together, these measures provide a layer of oversight that was absent before the HMICFRS (2023) inspection. Given the complexity of arrest, particularly in domestic cases and for looked after children, supervisory input at the point of the decision, rather than only in retrospect, would add further value. The research team worked with Greater Manchester Police (GMP) to develop a supervisory notification requirement, introduced in July 2024. Officers described this as having reduced the number of children brought into custody by around 100 per month, and Home Office arrest data show a subsequent 12.5% reduction in child arrests by GMP in the year ending March 2025 (Youth Justice Board 2026). The guidance and accompanying flowchart are reproduced in the annex to this report, and updated versions are included in the accompanying Child First Custody Toolkit. SWP is well placed to adopt a similar model. SWP's existing arrangements for supervisory oversight are consistent with Child First principles, but they have yet to be fully realised in practice where oversight occurs only after arrest and detention, or is not applied consistently across all cases.

Informal interviews: contemporaneous and mobile app recordings

In light of the practical barriers to arranging VAs, and with custody increasingly refusing to authorise detention, officers sometimes conducted interviews informally. These were recorded contemporaneously at the scene or shortly after an incident using pocket notebooks or body-worn video: "For a shoplift I might do a contemporaneous interview using my pocket notebook" (2.PC14). Others reported using the approach in cases involving small amounts of cannabis. However, a PCSO noted that the mandatory requirement for an appropriate adult made such interviews rare for children in practice (2.NPCSO1).

More recently, officers have been using a mobile app to guide interviews and refer cases directly to the YJS. As one officer explained: "We can now do OOCRs on our phone if they're eligible, it goes through automatically to the YJS" (1.PC4). The app is relatively new and still embedding in SWP. The app reminds officers that an appropriate adult must be present and encourages them to take children home so that a parent can fulfil that role. While these approaches allow cases to progress quickly and avoid unnecessary detention, they carry risks

around procedural safeguards, particularly access to legal advice. The BWV review and interviews with officers suggest that, where the app was used to record interviews, legal advice was not consistently offered, and in some cases was actively discouraged on grounds of practicality or delay. Legal advice is a critical protection for children, helping them understand their rights and the implications of accepting an OOCR. Operational convenience should not be allowed to override it.

SWP has indicated that all VA interviews, including those conducted contemporaneously via the app, will shortly be required to be logged through the VA sergeant or a trained supervisor, bringing the same procedural safeguards to bear. This is a welcome development, and its implications for out-of-court resolutions are considered in the following section.

Recommendations

The findings across section 5 point to a need for clearer operational guidance, stronger supervisory oversight, and better use of alternatives to arrest when children come to police attention. The logging of all VAs through a dedicated sergeant or trained supervisor is an encouraging step in the right direction, as is the morning review of child arrests by supervisors. The following recommendations are designed to build on this progress and support officers in making better-informed, less intrusive decisions at the point of arrest.

Recommendation 6: SWP should produce clear operational guidance for all frontline officers on less intrusive approaches at the point of arrest, covering: informal action and community resolutions; contemporaneous interviewing; voluntary attendance; and street bail under s30A PACE. The guidance should make clear that neither positive action nor the efficient progression of an investigation necessarily requires arrest.

Recommendation 7: This guidance should be supported by a decision-making flowchart to assist officers at the point when a child comes to police attention as a potential suspect. A version is provided in the annex to this report and in updated form in the *Child First Custody Toolkit*.

Recommendation 8: SWP should introduce a requirement for more senior officer oversight of all decisions to arrest a child, considering whether arrest complies with Code G and is a proportionate response having regard to the Child Gravity Matrix, whether detention is warranted, and whether less intrusive alternatives have been fully explored. The rank of the more senior officer and whether they are part of the frontline or custody team will be a matter of operational preference. A generic version of supervisory guidance developed and tested with GMP is provided in the annex to this report, and an updated version can be found in the *Child First Custody Toolkit*, available for adoption by any force.

The domestic abuse policy produces an almost automatic arrest response for 16- and 17-year-olds regardless of the circumstances of the individual child, drawing some children inappropriately into the criminal justice system.

Recommendation 9: SWP should review its policy in relation to domestic abuse cases involving children, particularly 16- and 17-year-olds, to ensure arrest is not applied automatically or without appropriate consideration. Officers should be empowered to

exercise the discretion that the law both permits and requires, with clear guidance on how safeguarding-led alternatives can be used in appropriate cases.

The use of mobile app-based and contemporaneous interviewing is increasing but procedural safeguards, particularly access to legal advice, are not consistently observed in these encounters.

Recommendation 10: The introduction of VA sergeants logging for contemporaneous interviews is a welcome step. SWP should build on this by ensuring that procedural safeguards, including the need for a risk assessment, the required presence of an appropriate adult, and the right to legal advice, are consistently observed in practice and not compromised by the informality or speed of the process. The app should not be used to facilitate a contemporaneous interview in circumstances where access to free and independent legal advice cannot be assured, on the street or in the child's home, and formal action is envisaged.

6. Out-of-court resolutions

Across agencies, diversion was articulated as the default response for children, with custody and prosecution framed as measures of last resort. This commitment appears genuine and reflects the direction set by the Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales. However, realising that commitment in practice is hampered by a number of interconnected issues, some specific to SWP and some reflecting gaps in national guidance.

Informal diversion and community resolutions

Officers described using informal diversion, including verbal warnings, direct engagement with children, parents and victims, and restorative conversations, particularly for low-level first-time offending. As one officer explained: "A lot of youth offending is very minor. A lot of people just want children spoken to. I do that quite a lot. I take them home and speak to them with their parents. Sometimes that will work" (1.PC3). This reflects Child First principles and is consistent with research evidence that minimum intervention and maximum diversion produce better outcomes (McAra and McVie 2007). The immediacy of these approaches was valued by officers who felt that formal processes were sometimes too slow to be meaningful.

However, informal diversion was not always well understood. First, terminology was inconsistent: informal outcomes were variously described as community resolutions, street restorative justice, or youth restorative disposals, creating confusion for officers, children, and their families. Secondly, there was a widespread conflation of acceptance of responsibility, sufficient for a community resolution, with admission of guilt required only for formal cautions and conditional cautions, limiting diversion in practice. Likewise, knowledge of Outcome 22 (a no further action disposal used where meaningful support or intervention has been provided) and understanding of prevention referrals were variable, contributing to inconsistent practice across the force.

Thirdly, some officers believed that a child who had already received a community resolution must automatically face a more formal response, with one describing offering children "their first and last warning" through a restorative approach (2.PC13). This is not what the law

requires: the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Act 2012 replaced the old reprimand and final warning scheme with a more flexible system in which decisions should be based on the individual circumstances of the child rather than a rigid escalation sequence. This misunderstanding risks unnecessarily routing children into more formal processes where informal diversion would have been more appropriate.

Finally, informal diversion also operated with insufficient oversight and consistency. Different views were expressed by frontline officers about what level of authorisation, if any, was required to impose a community resolution. There was uncertainty about whether the YJS was being notified of community resolutions within the 24-hour period that national guidance requires, or indeed at all, and whether other informal approaches were being communicated to the YJS. One YJS practitioner was critical of this lack of notification, explaining: "If an officer decides to administer a street RJ [restorative justice], we may never know about it or have any contact with the child" (YJS2). This meant that informal interventions were often invisible to partner agencies, weakening scrutiny and coordinated responses to vulnerability and risk, and limiting opportunities for early support. Children's understanding of what they were agreeing to, including the potential for community resolutions to appear on enhanced DBS checks, was not always ensured.

The inconsistency in terminology and approach identified here is not unique to SWP. It reflects a wider national issue, now recognised in the Ministry of Justice's Youth Justice White Paper (2026), *Cutting Youth Crime, Changing Young Lives*, which commits to reforming the out-of-court-resolution (OOCR) framework for children. This provides an important opportunity to consolidate national guidance on OOCRs for children, with clearer and more consistent terminology and eligibility criteria accessible to frontline officers across all forces.

Out-of-court resolutions and referrals to youth justice services

In most cases, OOCR decisions for children were referred to and managed by the YJS following police investigation and interview. Officers generally welcomed this, recognising the complexity of children's cases and the value of structured multi-agency assessment. YJS practitioners brought formal assessment tools, family and school engagement, and the ability to identify wider welfare needs, including exploitation risks, that a purely enforcement-focused process would miss. As one practitioner explained: "There may be other stuff going on in a child's life and it's only through an assessment that we are able to unpick it" (YJS1).

Frontline officers nonetheless played a crucial gatekeeping role. Although they did not formally determine outcomes, they shaped which cases reached the YJS, how they were presented, and what information was emphasised. Decisions made at the investigative stage, including how interviews were conducted and whether admissions were obtained, significantly influenced children's subsequent access to diversion. However, there was widespread uncertainty about the distinction between an acceptance of responsibility (sufficient for a community resolution) and an admission of guilt (required for a formal disposal). 'No comment' interviews were widely perceived as blocking access to diversion, even though some flexibility was said to exist in practice. In borderline cases, an officer's reading of the Child Gravity Matrix could result in charge where a YJS assessment might have identified a diversion pathway. Traffic officers were identified as sometimes automatically

routing children to court for traffic offences without YJS input, requiring YJS teams to intervene at court to divert cases to prevent unnecessary criminalisation. Cases unnecessarily taken to court are a national issue: costly in court time and legal fees and damaging for children and families who face proceedings that could have been avoided.

SWP is the only force in the wider study where police officers based in the YJS provided proactive input to frontline decision-making at the time a child was detained, reviewing cases and flagging diversion options on children's custody records. This is an important intervention, drawing on YJS knowledge of the child and diversionary expertise to inform case outcome decisions at the earliest opportunity. Its reach is currently limited however: input is confined to office hours and is not consistently known about among response officers, meaning its potential to inform decision-making at the time a child has been brought into police custody is not fully realised. Earlier YJS input at the point of arrest, or shortly thereafter, could help frontline officers make informed decisions about the appropriateness of informal action, and support judgements about the proportionality of arrest (using the Child Gravity Matrix) and the suitability of less intrusive approaches. Such youth specialism could prevent unnecessary interviews in some cases, support earlier release from detention, and reduce impact on the child and their family, and costs to the system. Addressing these limitations, and extending this model nationally, would strengthen early YJS involvement in frontline decision-making across forces. This proactive YJS involvement in custody decision-making also forms part of the wider oversight picture discussed below in section 8.

Delay

While valuable, there were widely expressed concerns that the formalised referral and assessment process took too long. Preparing a case for referral to the YJS could be quite protracted, involving gathering evidence, completion of the referral form and obtaining supervisor authorisation. A child would be released under investigation for this process to be completed, meaning that there were no timescales to require expedition in the referral process. Thereafter, the assessment process by the YJS took at least five to six weeks on average. The lengthy gap between offending and diversionary intervention was seen as undermining the timeliness important for maintaining children's engagement and reinforcing the connection between behaviour and consequences (McAra and McVie 2007). As one officer put it: "As a kid, you've got a lot going on and so the last thing you'll remember is what happened in an incident a few weeks ago, so we try to deal with it as soon as we can so they don't lose trust in us" (2.PC13). Addressing this locally and nationally requires both clearer internal timescales for police referral and joint consideration with YJS as to how assessment processes might be streamlined without negatively impacting quality, particularly in less serious cases.

Feedback to the frontline

A persistent frustration among frontline officers was the absence of feedback on OOCR outcomes and YJS interventions. As one PCSO explained: "From our point of view, when we deal with a child, or any case for that matter, we don't get to hear back what happened. We'd like to have an update on what work was done, or not done, with them, and to know whether they were on any type of intervention" (1.NPCSO1).

Without this information, officers cannot build their understanding of effective diversionary practice, and continuity in relationships with children repeatedly encountered in the community is undermined. More systematic feedback from YJS to frontline teams would support professional development and improve the quality of future diversionary and referral decisions.

Recommendations

Many of the challenges identified in this section reflect wider inconsistencies in guidance and practice rather than issues specific to SWP. The need for national reform has since been recognised in the Ministry of Justice Youth Justice White Paper (2026), which commits to reform of the OOCR framework for children. Wider findings and recommendations on diversion and OOCR resolutions are addressed in our frontline policing report (Kemp and Bevan 2026a). The following recommendations focus on what SWP can do within its own operational context to strengthen the use of diversion and OOCRs for children.

Recommendation 11: SWP should work with YJS partners to agree clear and consistent guidance on the use of OOCRs for frontline officers, covering: point of arrest diversion and when it is appropriate to use informal OOCRs; notification requirements for community resolutions and the appropriate mechanism for meeting them; the distinction between an acceptance of responsibility, sufficient for a community resolution, and an admission of guilt, required for a youth caution or conditional caution; and the appropriate use of Outcome 22 where no further action is taken and neither formal disposal nor criminal sanction is appropriate.

YJS involvement at the point of arrest or shortly thereafter could strengthen frontline diversionary decision-making and reduce unnecessary detention, but access to YJS advice is currently limited to office hours and not consistently known about among response officers.

Recommendation 12: SWP should work with YJS to identify how frontline officers can access information about children known to the YJS at the point of arrest and seek youth justice specialist advice in making diversionary decisions. More consistent access to YJS during working hours and meaningful out-of-hours provision are both required.

The delay between an offence and any diversionary intervention was widely seen as undermining children's engagement and the effectiveness of diversion itself.

Recommendation 13: SWP should work with YJS to introduce a target timescale for referral for an OOCR assessment, and develop a fast-track pathway for low-level offending, so that a community resolution or informal disposal can be imposed within days of an offence rather than weeks, minimising the gap between an offence and any diversionary intervention.

A persistent frustration among frontline officers was the absence of feedback on the outcomes of referrals, which limited professional learning and undermined continuity in relationships with children repeatedly encountered in the community.

Recommendation 14: A feedback loop from YJS to frontline officers on the outcomes of OOCR referrals should be established, on an aggregate basis where individual case feedback is not practical, to support professional development and improve the quality of future referral decisions.

7. Frontline policing: social welfare and preventative work

A central finding of this study is that the overwhelming majority of police interactions with children arise from welfare concerns rather than crime. One inspector estimated that at night, crime accounts for only around 20% of child-related police work overall, with missing children alone representing a significant proportion of response officers' workload, the majority involving looked after children. This has profound implications for how police resources are deployed and for the risk that vulnerable children are drawn into formal criminal processes through welfare contacts that should never have involved policing in the first place.

Policing as default welfare response

Frontline officers repeatedly described being called upon to fill gaps left by the absence of other services, particularly out of hours. Three patterns were particularly evident. First, the Friday afternoon handover: officers frequently described social workers calling police late on Friday afternoons to report children missing, passing responsibility for the child to police before logging off for the weekend. Second, children's homes routinely generating missing person referrals when children committed minor breaches of their curfew, because lone night workers lacked the authority or capacity to search for them. Third, police attendance at incidents within children's homes arising from unmet mental health needs, with no route to appropriate out-of-hours support. In some cases, the presence of uniformed officers served to escalate rather than resolve situations, with children becoming agitated and incidents ending in arrest and custody. As one officer put it: "We're probably doing more harm than good" (1.PC7).

The structural problem running through all three patterns is the absence of adequate out-of-hours mental health and social care provision, leaving police as the default response for vulnerable children in circumstances where a uniformed officer is often the least appropriate person to help. Several officers noted that the Right Care, Right Person initiative had begun to reduce some of these inappropriate referrals. This is consistent with the recent evaluation of RCRP (Home Office and Department of Health and Social Care 2024), which found early evidence of reductions in police time spent on health-related incidents, while also identifying implementation challenges around health and social care capacity, inter-agency communication and clarity of roles. In the context of children, this reinforces the need for a more explicit child-focused approach, particularly in relation to agencies' statutory responsibilities to safeguard and promote children's welfare under section 11 of the Children Act 2004. The absence of adequate out-of-hours provision is likely to contribute to the over-representation of looked after children in police custody.

A related concern, particularly for looked after children who may be a long way from home with no local family, is the use of police premises as a de facto place of safety when children's services fail to respond promptly. Officers described having to bring children into police stations, using police protection powers under s46 of the Children Act 1989, and supervising them there overnight while waiting for children's services to attend. Officers felt strongly that police stations do not have suitable conditions for children to be detained in this way and, while acknowledging the strain on partner agencies, described long delays in children's services attending. Leaving vulnerable children in police premises for lengthy

periods, often overnight, cannot be regarded as an acceptable discharge of children's services' statutory responsibilities.

The Public Protection Notice system and multi-agency safeguarding

Frontline officers are required to complete a Public Protection Notice (PPN) following any interaction with a child, feeding into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) where referrals are risk-rated. In practice, most are graded high risk, typically triggering a strategy meeting within 24 hours. This infrastructure is a genuine strength, reinforced by a three-day MASH attachment for all new SWP officers. However, response officers were typically informed only whether their referral had been 'shared' or 'not shared,' with no further detail: "We feed stuff up the chain but we never hear anything back" (2.PC14). Action may well follow within the safeguarding system, but this is rarely visible to the officer who made the referral, still less to those subsequently dealing with the child in a criminal justice context. This lack of feedback disengaged officers from the safeguarding process and reduced the quality of subsequent referrals. A feedback mechanism to the frontline would help to improve both officer engagement and safeguarding outcomes. Without this feedback loop, the conditions for a genuinely Child First approach across the frontline cannot be fully established.

Specialist teams and preventative work

The training gaps identified among frontline officers are felt acutely in welfare contexts, where the complexity of multi-agency working demands specialist knowledge that is not evenly distributed across teams. SWP's specialist missing and exploitation teams demonstrated a strong commitment to child-centred practice. The integration of missing and exploitation functions, the use of engagement officers positioned explicitly as supportive rather than enforcement-focused, and the central missing team's 24/7 risk assessment function all reflect serious institutional commitment to this approach. The National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) workers embedded within these teams were particularly valuable: their independence from police, children's services and care homes meant children were more willing to disclose important information to them, and their return home interviews were genuinely welfare-focused rather than primarily information-gathering exercises. As one NYAS worker explained: "My job is to engage with young people. It's not their job to engage with me" (NYAS.1). The secondments, in which PCSOs were embedded within Early Help teams, were described across agencies as highly effective in strengthening referral pathways and building officer knowledge of available support. This is consistent with wider research highlighting the value of closer integration between YJS, Children's Social Care, Early Help and other services for children, while also recognising that integration is unevenly developed across local areas (Youth Justice Board 2024b).

Resource pressures and the redeployment of neighbourhood officers under the Government's 'Safer Streets Mission' have reduced the reach of this model, and reconnecting frontline officers with Early Help and preventative services when working with children should be a priority. For newer-in-service officers, who may encounter complex welfare situations with little prior experience to draw on, in-person supervisory support at the point of decision, rather than only in retrospect, is especially important.

The welfare-justice gap

A structural fault line runs through even the most sophisticated multi-agency arrangements, including in SWP. The system works well when a child is firmly within the welfare sphere. It becomes significantly more complicated when that child crosses into criminal justice processes: exploitation officers step back when a child is under criminal investigation, and welfare workers navigate carefully around ongoing proceedings. The cumulative effect is that a child, often at their most vulnerable, risks falling into a gap between two parallel systems not designed to operate in an integrated way (Byrne 2023).

The challenge is not only one of resources, though additional resource is much needed, but of integration and system design. The criminal justice system is adversarial by nature and cannot fully accommodate Child First principles. A genuinely Child First approach therefore operates on two levels: reducing the number of children who enter the criminal justice system in the first place through diversion, minimum intervention and welfare-focused policing; and ensuring that for those children who do enter it, child-centred practices are in place at every stage. This is a national challenge, not one specific to SWP, and current arrangements do not consistently meet either aspiration.

Recommendations

A central finding of this study is that the overwhelming majority of police interactions with children arise from welfare concerns rather than crime, yet the structures and resources needed to support the police in responding appropriately to vulnerable children out of hours are inadequate. The following recommendation addresses the most significant structural gap identified.

Recommendation 15: SWP should work with local authorities and other partners, drawing on the Right Care, Right Person framework, to develop a child-specific protocol establishing: which agency holds primary responsibility for particular welfare-related calls involving children; access to mental health and social care support, and improved information-sharing, for children at the point of coming to police attention and in police custody; and a mechanism to identify alternative accommodation for children, to avoid police stations and custody being used as a default place of safety.

The Early Help secondments described above, though no longer in place due to resource pressures, demonstrate the value of structured learning across agency boundaries, and the feedback gap in the PPN process points to a broader need for officers to understand how the wider safeguarding system works and what happens when they make a referral. Building this knowledge systematically, through skill-sharing, champion roles, and structured exposure to partner agencies, would strengthen the frontline response to the welfare-focused majority of police interactions with children.

Recommendation 16: SWP should explore mechanisms for maximising learning and skill-sharing within and across frontline teams, including:

- regularly auditing the specialist skills and knowledge of team members and establishing champion roles so that individuals with relevant expertise can share their knowledge in a structured way;

- introducing shift-shadowing or short secondments to specialist units and partner agencies including YJS, Early Help, children's services, MASH, child protection, exploitation and missing teams;
- identifying opportunities for short inputs from specialist teams, such as YJS and children's services, and for showcasing good practice at the start of shifts;
- implementing on-patrol, in-person supervision for young-in-service frontline officers to model child-centred behaviour and support decision-making in context.

Child First principles will only be consistently embedded if they are reflected in SWP's strategic direction. The section that follows examines how Child First principles can be brought into police custody, and the progress SWP has already made in that direction.

8. Children brought into police custody

This study represents a second period of custody observation for the research team, who have previously spent extended time in custody across a number of forces speaking with children, lawyers, appropriate adults and custody staff (Kemp and others 2023). Those findings provided an important evidence base for change. The wider findings from the current project are reported separately in the project's report on children in police custody (Kemp and Bevan 2026b).

On this occasion, the focus was on reviewing the changes introduced by SWP following the critical HMICFRS (2023) inspection and considering how those changes could be built upon to move towards a genuinely Child First approach. In the course of the study, the research team discussed with SWP the potential for piloting a 12-hour detention clock, an approach already being used informally in other forces. Although the pilot had not yet been implemented during the fieldwork, SWP is now in the process of putting it in place as part of its wider child-centred custody reforms.

The account that follows focuses on the reforms already introduced within custody, including strengthened authorisation of detention, earlier inspector oversight and improved attention to children's welfare, and considers their implications for Child First practice.

The treatment of children in police custody in SWP has been significantly shaped by the HMICFRS inspection report (2023), which identified a range of areas for improvement. These included: lack of prioritisation when booking children into custody, inspector reviews failing to account for children's additional needs, inadequate consideration of whether ongoing detention should be authorised, healthcare professionals (HCPs) not routinely seeing children, and children spending extended periods in custody without prompt case progression. In some cases, investigating officers were not allocated promptly, particularly at night, and delays occurred waiting for appropriate adults to arrive. SWP has acted on these concerns by introducing a number of changes to custody decision-making and practice.

Gatekeeping and authorising detention

Decisions about whether a child should be detained in police custody were described by custody officers as being taken on a case-by-case basis, with many positioning themselves as gatekeepers responsible for applying a more stringent test to children than to adults. Importantly, they commented on resisting what they saw as routine assumptions from

arresting officers that arrest should lead to detention: "It's like they're following a flowchart that goes from arrest to detention, which might be okay with an older person but not with a 14-year-old boy" (CO1). The flowchart recommended in Section 5 and set out in the Annex to support diversionary decision-making at the point of arrest is intended to address this assumption, ensuring that alternatives to detention are actively considered before a child reaches custody at all.

Several officers described growing confidence in refusing detention over time, particularly for less serious offences, with one noting that this was already having an effect on frontline behaviour: "I'm getting more confident with decision-making and I'll refuse quite a lot of juveniles, as do other officers. So we're now getting fewer officers turning up with juveniles unless it's for significant offences" (CO1).² Officers also drew a key distinction between the necessity to arrest under Code G and the separate necessity to detain under PACE s37: "There are many occasions where it is possible to arrest and the arrest is necessary, proportionate, legal and ethical, but it is not necessary for that person to be detained" (CO8).

This shift was reinforced by organisational messaging from senior leadership and awareness of external scrutiny, including monitoring by the Welsh Government: "We don't want our CI [chief inspector] to question why we're bringing a child into custody, so we have to have a good reason for doing so" (CO7). Research from the wider study has shown that detention remains the default outcome following arrest, with refusals occurring in only 1% of children's cases (Kent and others 2026).³ The more active gatekeeping approach described by custody officers in SWP therefore represents a meaningful departure from the norm, and one consistent with children's rights under Article 37 of the UNCRC, which frames detention as a measure of last resort.

However, refusals of detention were not without difficulty. Frontline officers sometimes took them personally, and custody officers described occasional pressure from supervisors and senior officers: "Upstairs [senior officers] want to see positive action, custody want to see less risk in their cells" (1.Sgt2). Custody officers were also conscious that refusal decisions could be questioned retrospectively if a child went on to cause harm. These tensions are real, but the direction of travel is encouraging, and the gatekeeping role of custody officers appears to be increasingly recognised as a legitimate and important function within SWP.

Prioritisation and oversight at booking-in

In response to the HMICFRS inspection, SWP introduced a requirement for children to be prioritised where there is a queue on arrival at custody. Both frontline officers and custody staff reported this was working well in practice. Custody officers also described taking more time at the desk to explain procedures to children, adjusting their communication style and pace: "Generally, we try and take a step back, particularly if it's their first time in custody. We try to slow everything down and explain everything more" (CO6). To support this, SWP introduced an electronic rights tablet providing a visual and audio explanation of children's

² The term 'juvenile' used here, while embedded in PACE and the Codes of Practice, sits uneasily with a Child First approach, a point addressed in the national recommendations in the full project reports.

³ This analysis drew on 12 months of child custody record data from five police forces for the year ending March 2023, collected as part of the wider Nuffield Foundation-funded study.

rights and entitlements, though staff recognised its effectiveness varied depending on the child's age and prior experience of custody.

Inspectors now play a more active role from the point detention is authorised. Rather than being based in a separate inspector's room, they are now positioned on the bridge, giving them direct visibility of the custody suite and everyone in it. They conduct an early review of every child within the first hour or two of arrival. As well as checking on the continuing need for detention, they will look to see if investigators have a clear plan and confirm that every child is seen by an HCP. SWP increased the number of inspectors on duty across its custody suites specifically to support this more detailed function.

SWP custody record data suggest these changes are having a measurable impact. The rate of refused detentions has risen steadily, from 2.2% in 2023 to 6.5% in 2025, compared with the 1% average identified in the wider custody record analysis (Kent and others 2026). But formal refusals at the custody desk are likely to tell only part of the story. The overall volume of child detentions fell by around 28% between 2023 and 2025, suggesting that a cultural shift is taking place earlier in the process, with officers increasingly unlikely to bring a child to custody in the first place. Taken together, these trends point to a force that has responded seriously to external scrutiny and where the changes introduced are beginning to produce demonstrable results.

The relationship between inspectors and custody officers appeared collaborative rather than adversarial, with custody officers welcoming inspector involvement as an additional safeguard: "The inspector's involvement reminds you that there should be a lot of scrutiny around a child's detention. We can get distracted by things, particularly due to the demand elsewhere, and so it can be helpful" (CO4). Daily management meetings held on weekdays provide further oversight, with senior leadership able to review any child in custody in real time and reports provided to the Welsh Government where concerns arise. This direct line of accountability to the Welsh Government reflects the broader Welsh policy commitment to Child First principles established in the introduction and distinguishes SWP's accountability arrangements from those observed in English forces. The proactive input of YJS officers to custody decision-making, discussed in section 6, strengthens this framework further.

These are genuine and meaningful improvements, and staff spoke positively about their impact in practice. At the same time, custody remains a pressured environment, and staff recognised that consistent application can be difficult when suites are busy or volatile: "If you've got a busy custody suite with lots of banging and screaming, things will fall through the cracks" (CO7). This is an honest reflection of the realities of custody work rather than a criticism of the reforms themselves. Embedding these changes more consistently across shifts and suites will require the kind of Child First training and cultural development that the recommendations below seek to address.

Reducing time in custody: addressing delays and moving towards an extendable 12-hour clock

Once a child is in custody, prompt case progression is essential to minimising the time they spend in detention. Custody officers and inspectors described actively challenging delays and maintaining a strong presumption against overnight detention. A primary driver of extended

detention was investigator delay. Custody officers described a persistent handover culture in which cases were routinely passed from one shift to the next rather than progressed by the arresting officer: “If you have an arrest at night, officers in the morning will try and find lots of reasons why they don’t want to deal with it” (CO1). This handover culture is not unique to SWP and has been observed across the forces participating in the wider study.

The consequences for children were direct: hours were added to the custody clock while investigators delayed, reorganised their workload, or waited for shift change. In some cases, concerns were raised about officers deliberately arresting children late in a shift with the intention of handing them over to the next team. Custody officers and inspectors responded to these pressures by chasing investigators and using short bail to release children, particularly overnight, to return the following day for interview: “We don’t want a child in custody overnight, let’s get it dealt with” (CO2). These are valuable practices, but they depend on individual initiative rather than structural safeguards, and their impact is necessarily uneven.

SWP custody record data show month-to-month fluctuation across the period, with average detention times ranging from a maximum of 15 hours and 33 minutes, recorded in July 2023, to 10 hours and 43 minutes in January 2025, against an average of 11 hours and 48 minutes across five forces for the year ending March 2023 (Kent and others 2026). Within this variation, there is a general trend in the right direction: children in SWP custody spent, on average, around an hour less in detention in 2024 and 2025 than in 2023, a modest but meaningful improvement.

Evidence from Surrey Police’s piloting of an extendable 12-hour clock in custody suggests that this approach can reduce the time children spend in detention. In Surrey, average detention times fell from 11 hours and 6 minutes before the pilot to 9 hours and 24 minutes during the pilot period, with updated figures showing a further reduction to 7 hours and 36 minutes by early 2025 (Kemp Bevan 2025b). This compares favourably with the overall average detention time of 11 hours and 48 minutes identified in custody data for the year ending March 2023 (Kent and others 2026).

Drawing on this evidence, and in response to the structural problems identified in this study, SWP is now arranging to pilot a similar extendable 12-hour clock for children in custody. Under this model, a child’s detention would be expected to conclude within 12 hours or be subject to specific authorisation for extension to 24 hours, requiring sign-off at inspector rank or above. Its significance goes beyond process. A 12-hour clock directly addresses the culture that treats a child’s detention as someone else’s problem: “It will stop a lot of officers having the mindset of ‘I can drop the child off at custody and someone will pick it up’” (CO1). It spans more than one shift, forcing planning across handovers; creates pressure to avoid overnight detention; and sends a clear structural signal that children are different from adults, whose initial detention limit is 24 hours.

Support for the 12-hour clock among custody staff, inspectors and custody detention officers was near-universal in the Surrey pilot (Kemp and Bevan 2025b). When the proposal was discussed with SWP custody staff during this study, it was met with the same broad support, provided that an extension mechanism was included for serious and/or complex cases. SWP

intends to build that mechanism into the proposed model, ensuring that the pilot does not compromise investigations where the offence or circumstances genuinely require more time.

Recommendations

The handover culture identified by custody officers as the primary driver of extended detention requires a structural solution, not one that depends on individual initiative. SWP is now arranging to pilot a 12-hour detention clock for children, an approach already introduced informally in other forces.

Recommendation 17: SWP should pilot a 12-hour PACE clock for children, with extension to 24 hours requiring explicit authorisation at inspector rank or above.

Recommendation 18: The pilot should be underpinned by a clear presumption against detention save where specified factors justify it, including: the seriousness of the offence, complexity of the investigation, urgent need for forensic samples, risk of collusion or interference with evidence, or absence of alternative safe accommodation. Where none of the factors justifying detention is present, release of the child, whether on short bail or by way of voluntary attendance for interview, should be the default, and custody officers should actively promote alternatives to detention at the point when continued detention is being considered.

8.1 Health, welfare and multi-agency support

Children enter custody with complex needs, and the reforms described above address how long they spend there and how they are treated while detained. What they do not address is the broader context in which children are held. The evidence from across interviews points consistently to the same finding: statutory agencies are largely absent from custody in practice.

Within that context, HCPs provide a critical point of contact. Following the 2023 inspection, SWP introduced a requirement that every child detained in custody must be seen by an HCP. This is a significant procedural safeguard that makes HCPs one of the few practitioners guaranteed to see every child in custody. The assessment encounter therefore operates both as clinical triage and as a safeguarding screen, placing a weight on the process that it was never designed to carry. The HCP workforce is drawn largely from paramedic and emergency backgrounds, with limited formal training in child-specific practice. The same assessment template is used for adults and children. Adaptation for children is typically a matter of individual style rather than structured guidance. As one HCP reflected: "We do our best but is it good enough? Probably not" (HCP1).

HCPs automatically submit safeguarding referrals to social care for every child, which in formal terms creates a bridge to the wider child protection system. In practice, social workers rarely attend during the custody period (unless acting as the child's appropriate adult) and responses are administrative rather than operational. As HCP1 put it: "It's just tick-boxing, we don't actually do anything with the child." The YJS, despite holding detailed histories on many of the children who come into custody, has no routine operational presence there and no consistent information-sharing pathway with HCPs or custody staff. A

Wales-specific structural barrier compounds this: HCPs cannot access NHS health records, meaning medication histories, mental health diagnoses, and neurodevelopmental assessments are invisible at the point of assessment. HCPs can attempt to obtain this information by contacting relevant services directly, but this is only possible during working hours, leaving officers caring for children detained at night or over weekends without access to potentially critical clinical information. One HCP described a 16-year-old whose cognitive functioning was equivalent to that of a seven-year-old, information that would have fundamentally altered both the clinical approach and the fitness-for-interview assessment: "If I'd known that it would have changed my approach to him too" (HCP1).

The absence of mental health provision is the most acute gap. An on-site mental health nurse confirmed that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is effectively inaccessible for children in custody, particularly out of hours, and that no formal referral mechanism exists: "If I see an adult in custody who needs mental health support, I can refer them on, there are pathways. For a child, there's nothing" (MH1). This gap is especially concerning given recent child-focused research on liaison and diversion services, which found that provision for children is variable, limited by resources, and not always working effectively within the current all-age model (Lennox and others 2025). The concern is also reflected in the neurodevelopmental profile described by practitioners across custody: "We can literally guarantee that everyone you speak to has ADHD or autism, saw CAMHS as a youngster and was kicked out of school" (HCP1). The reform proposed by practitioners was relatively modest: an on-call arrangement enabling access to CAMHS support when required, whether through a referral pathway or direct engagement with emergency provision. As the mental health nurse put it: "It doesn't have to be complex. It just needs to exist" (MH1).

The exploitation team in Cardiff has developed a strong model of engagement with vulnerable children in custody, checking daily whether children known to them are detained and visiting them in the cells where exploitation indicators are present. The visit is not about the alleged offence; its purpose is to maintain the relationship, offer reassurance, and begin conversations about the circumstances that brought the child to custody. This is good practice, but it is informal and dependent on prior relationships and team capacity. For children not already known to the exploitation team, there is no equivalent provision. A genuinely systematic approach would involve exploitation screening as a routine element of every child's time in custody, delivered by child-specialist practitioners with access to relevant intelligence and linked to referral pathways, rather than being contingent on whether a child is already known.

The appropriate adult (AA) safeguard is similarly inconsistent, particularly out of hours. During daytime hours, YJS workers act as AAs, a broadly positive arrangement given their specialist knowledge and commitment to child-centred practice. Outside those hours, provision falls to social care's Emergency Duty Team (EDT), a crisis-focused service neither designed nor resourced for this function. Custody officers and inspectors described significant difficulty contacting EDT, extended waiting times, and instances where attendance was refused altogether. The consequence in practice was bail used not as a principled decision but as a default response to a safeguarding failure: "You're bailing them not because it's the right thing to do at that point, but because you have no choice. The

appropriate adult isn't coming" (Insp2). This mandatory PACE safeguard, which the YJS has a statutory duty to provide (under s38(4)(a) Crime and Disorder Act 1998), is effectively unavailable to a significant proportion of children detained outside working hours. This is well understood within SWP but remains unresolved: "Everyone knows EDT can't always get someone out. It's not a new problem. But nothing seems to change" (CO7).

The cumulative effect of these absences is that responsibility for children's welfare falls largely to custody officers, inspectors, detention officers and HCPs. Yet they often lack the authority, information and specialist support needed to meet children's needs and rights. Custody is not a welfare resource and should not be treated as one. But when a child is detained, the state has direct contact with a child who may be at a point of crisis, and that contact should be used to the fullest safeguarding advantage.

Recommendations

The complete absence of mental health provision for children in custody is not acceptable, particularly given the vulnerability and neurodevelopmental profile of many children detained.

Recommendation 19: SWP should work with healthcare providers to establish a formal referral pathway from police custody into CAMHS. Where urgent mental health support is required for a child in custody outside of regular hours, existing on-call mental health provision should be extended to include children in police custody within its remit, ensuring that those already on call are aware of and able to respond to referrals from custody when required.

HCPs are being asked to perform a child-specific safeguarding function without child-specific training, or access to NHS and CAMHS records. Addressing this is essential to the quality and consistency of welfare assessment in custody.

Recommendation 20: SWP should work with healthcare providers to ensure HCP staff are appropriately trained and resourced for child-specific practice in custody, including training in child development, trauma-informed approaches, exploitation indicators, and neurodevelopmental needs. Child-specific assessment guidance should be developed to support consistent practice. SWP should support healthcare providers in addressing the Wales-specific barrier to NHS record access as a matter of priority, given its direct impact on fitness for interview assessments and clinical care.

Partner agencies do not work effectively with custody teams to safeguard the welfare of children in custody. Clearer responsibilities and more active engagement from partner agencies are needed.

Recommendation 21: SWP should work with children's services, YJS and specialist policing teams to agree arrangements ensuring that:

- Children's services and YJS are notified promptly on a child's booking-in;
- where the child is known to partner agencies, relevant information is shared routinely with custody staff to inform treatment within custody, safeguarding, disposal and release decisions;

- where remand is a realistic prospect, or placement difficulties prevent release, alternative accommodation is actively sought at the earliest opportunity;
- exploitation and missing indicators result in prompt contact from the relevant specialist team; and
- looked after children are seen by, or have virtual contact with, a social worker during their detention.

Out-of-hours AA provision is a mandatory PACE safeguard, but the study found it is failing children in custody on a routine basis. This is not a problem unique to SWP; similar gaps in provision were identified across most forces participating in the wider study. This indicates a systemic weakness in safeguarding arrangements for children in police detention.

Recommendation 22: SWP should work with YJS partners, who have a statutory duty to provide 24-hour AA coverage, to ensure that provision for children is consistently available around the clock and is fit for purpose. Failure to secure an AA within a reasonable period should trigger escalation, with provision subject to scrutiny to ensure duties are being met.

8.2 Children in interview

The police interview is the central procedural moment in a child's time in custody: the point at which their account is sought, their key legal rights are activated, and which often determines decisions about prosecution or diversion. Despite this, the adversarial nature of the criminal process means that meaningful participation of the child is far from guaranteed.

Under s58 of PACE, children are entitled to free and independent legal advice, and they are informed of that right when booked into custody. However, as with adults, children are required to opt into this key legal protection and research has identified that children often lack an understanding of the benefits and importance of legal advice (Bevan 2020, Kemp and others 2023). SWP custody record data show that, overall, 86.6% of children requested legal advice across the period, in line with the 86.7% average observed across the five forces in the wider study (Kent and others 2026). Changes to custody practice in SWP appear to have contributed to a general upward trend in uptake, though with notable fluctuation across the period. Request rates ranged from 82.5% in the second half of 2024, rising to 91.4% in the first half of 2025, before dropping back again. The overall picture is nonetheless a positive one: lawyer requests among children in SWP are broadly consistent with national patterns, and the general direction of travel suggests that recent changes to custody practice are supporting children's access to legal advice at this critical stage of the process.

However significant inconsistencies persist, arising in particular from the nature of AA in attendance. Trained AAs typically exercise their power to insist on a lawyer being called for a child (Code C 6.5A), understanding legal advice as a fundamental safeguard. Parents and family members attending as AA are less likely to request legal advice, where the child has declined, often for fear that this will significantly delay release. This points to the importance of a presumption in favour of legal advice for all children in custody, so that a lawyer is automatically contacted and able to speak with the child before any decision to waive that right is made.

Officers described early disclosure of OOCR options as beneficial in encouraging engagement in interview. Early case assessment enables the child's lawyer to give informed advice about the options available, and tends to generate more productive responses in interview, increasing the chance of the child being diverted. In some cases, timely YJS input could mean that an interview is unnecessary altogether, with diversion agreed before that stage is reached. This makes early case assessment and timely YJS input not just administratively desirable but directly relevant to the quality and necessity of the interview itself. Both remain inconsistent in practice across the forces in the wider study, with significant consequences for children and for the integrity of the process.

A further fundamental concern is the framework within which child suspects are interviewed. *Achieving Best Evidence* (ABE) is the structured approach for interviewing child victims and witnesses, sensitive to age, developmental stage and communication needs (Ministry of Justice 2022). No equivalent national framework exists for interviewing child suspects; interviews proceed without any requirement for the interviewing officer to have training in communication with children or vulnerable people. Nor was there evidence in SWP of adjustments commonly being made to accommodate a child's particular needs in interview; the AA was considered to be the catch-all safeguard, despite the role commonly being fulfilled by parents or carers.

The unfairness arising from this lack of adjustment is particularly acute in exploitation cases where the child may be both suspect and victim. This, again, is not confined to SWP. It is one of the most significant national issues to emerge from this study, and the project's custody report calls on the Home Office and College of Policing to develop child-specific investigative interview guidance for child suspects, equivalent in its recognition of age, development and communication needs to the ABE framework, while reflecting the distinct legal context of the suspect interview. This would recognise all children as vulnerable and entitled to appropriate protections by virtue of their age, regardless of whether they are interviewed as a victim or a suspect.

8.3 Towards a Child First approach in custody

The evidence presented in this section points to a police force making genuine progress in many areas. Gatekeeping, prioritisation at booking-in, enhanced inspector oversight, HCPs seeing all children in custody, YJS officers conducting daily checks, and the growing use of short bail to avoid overnight detention all represent real and welcome change. SWP's commitment to piloting an extendable 12-hour detention clock takes that progress a significant step further, addressing the structural problem that individual reforms alone cannot solve.

What remains largely unchanged is the broader context in which children are held. Statutory partner agencies remain significantly absent. Mental health provision does not extend to children in custody. Safeguarding and exploitation concerns are not consistently integrated into custody decision-making itself. Although SWP has strong specialist missing and exploitation arrangements, and these teams provide important support where children are already known or cases are escalated, custody staff do not always have access to specialist input at the point of need. The AA safeguard is inconsistently available outside working

hours. And the interview process proceeds on adult terms regardless of a child's age, development, or circumstances.

These are not failures of individual officers. Custody officers, inspectors and custody detention officers were consistent in their commitment to doing right by children, often under significant pressure and without the resources or specialist support their role requires. The gaps identified here are systemic, and they require systemic responses: clearer multi-agency responsibilities, better information-sharing, accessible mental health provision, and a child-specific interview framework.

A genuinely Child First approach to custody requires not just police reform but a fundamental rethinking of what multi-agency responsibility means at the point of detention. SWP has the foundations to lead that change, and the extendable 12-hour clock pilot, if supported by the wider reforms recommended here, offers a genuine opportunity to demonstrate what that approach looks like in practice.

Recommendation

An explicit Child First framework would give custody practice a clearer principled foundation and support consistent application across suites and shifts.

Recommendation 23: SWP should formally adopt an overarching Child First framework for custody, bringing together the individual reforms already implemented within a coherent, principle-led approach. This framework should explicitly challenge the cultural assumption that time spent in police custody can function as an appropriate response to children's behaviour. This should be underpinned by Child First training for all custody staff, including inspectors, custody officers, custody detention officers, and HCPs, ensuring that child-centred practice is embedded as a professional standard rather than dependent on individual experience or background.

Taken together, the reforms already introduced by SWP provide a strong foundation; the next step is to embed them within a clear Child First framework that can be sustained consistently across custody practice.

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Annex: Decision-Making Tools for Child Arrests

This annex contains two decision-making tools referenced in the recommendations above. The flowchart was developed to support frontline officers at the point when a child comes to police attention as a potential suspect and is referenced in Recommendation 7. Developed by the research team in conjunction with Greater Manchester Police (GMP), the Supervisory Authorisation of Child Arrests: Guiding Principles was designed to strengthen supervisory oversight of decisions to arrest children. Drawing on operational guidance subsequently implemented force-wide by GMP, the framework has been adapted into a generic model suitable for adoption by any police force. It underpins the supervisory oversight recommendation set out in Recommendation 8 and is intended to support consideration of alternatives to arrest and detention, promote compliance with Code G of PACE, and embed Child First principles within arrest decision-making.

Supervisory Authorisation of Child Arrests: Guiding Principles

Before a child is arrested, the arresting officer's supervisor must, where practicable, be consulted on the necessity to arrest and to bring the child into police custody. The purpose of this requirement is to ensure that all appropriate alternatives to arrest are considered first, and that any arrest that does proceed is necessary, proportionate and lawful. The supervising officer should apply the following guiding principles alongside the National Decision Model when reaching their decision.

1. Does the arrest comply with Code G of PACE?

Code G must underpin any decision to arrest. All appropriate alternatives to detention should be considered before a child is brought into custody, including voluntary attendance interview, community resolution, removal to an alternative safe location, and Police Protection powers under section 46 of the Children Act 1989. As confirmed in *ST v Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire Police*, the fact that the person to be arrested is a child requires specific consideration, given the duty to safeguard and promote their welfare. This requires an assessment of whether a less intrusive alternative to arrest or detention should be taken wherever it is a practical option.

2. Consider the severity of the offence using the Child Gravity Matrix.

The Child Gravity Matrix should be used to assess the seriousness of the offence and to inform the appropriate response. Lower-level offending should prompt active consideration of diversionary options rather than arrest.

3. Consider whether arrest is necessary to preserve evidence.

Will evidence be lost if the child is not arrested and brought into custody? Relevant considerations include: forensic opportunities; whether fingerprint or DNA samples need to be taken; whether a search of premises or the seizure of a mobile phone is required to secure further evidence. If these do not apply, the necessity for arrest should be carefully scrutinised.

4. Consider threat, harm and risk.

Is it necessary to arrest and bring the child into custody to reduce a threat, harm or risk to them or to others? Where this is the consideration, alternative options must be explored first, including seeking alternative safe accommodation in consultation with children's

services. Where a child needs to be removed from premises to safeguard them from significant harm, Police Protection powers should be preferred over arrest.

5. Consider the child's vulnerabilities and welfare.

All aspects of the child's vulnerability and welfare must be considered, including the likely impact of bringing the child into police custody and the time of day. Where appropriate, alternatives should be explored in consultation with family members and children's services before a decision to arrest is made.

6. Consider the impact of the offence, including the victim's views and the public interest.

The views of the victim and the wider public interest should be taken into account. Officers should ensure that the victim is kept informed of the course of action taken, in line with the Victims' Code.

Recording requirements

The supervising officer must record on the incident log their considerations and the reasons for their decision, whether or not an arrest proceeds. Where a child is arrested and brought into custody, the custody officer must be informed that supervisory authorisation has been given.

Where a custody officer refuses to authorise detention of a child, this must be recorded and reviewed as part of the force's custody audit and performance processes, to identify individual and organisational learning.

Flowchart for Decision-Making at Point of Arrest – see overleaf.

Have you fully assessed the child's circumstances and vulnerability?

- What are the child's home circumstances/ Is the child 'looked after'?
- Are they known to YJS or Children's Services? Contact YJS/Children's Services/EDT to understand current engagement/support
- Are there neurodiversity, ACEs, trauma issues to consider? Is the child known to be at risk of CCE/CSE?

Point of arrest flowchart for frontline officers

Yes

No

Contact relevant services/family members for information

Consider the Child Gravity Matrix, taking into account aggravating and mitigating factors

Score
1 - 2

Score
2+

Does any formal action need to be taken?

Consider, can the child:

- be removed from the location?
- be spoken to with parent(s) or carer(s)?
- referred to YJS on a voluntary basis?

Yes

Suitable for community resolution by police?

Consider:

- GMP guidance (link)
- contact YJS or OOCR officer for advice
- check with supervisor

No

Can child be VA'ed?

Consider:

- a child is unlikely to abscond
- VA enables attendance with AA and solicitor at a time suitable to all
- VA interview more likely to be fruitful in custody) where multiple or complex allegations
- VA enables attendance with AA and solicitor at a time suitable to all

No

If considering arresting to reduce Threat, Harm and Risk, consider:

- seeking alternative safe accommodation working with Children's Services.
- use of Police Protection powers (s46 Children Act 1989) where removal required to safeguard from significant harm.

What are the Code G grounds?

Remember:

- Arrest should be a 'last resort' for children (UN Convention on Rights of the Child) as per College of Policing's APP.
- Best interests of the child must be a primary consideration
- Duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (s11 Children Act 2004)
- Investigative convenience is **not** necessity
- Timing - if evening, what will be achieved overnight?
- Where forensics/samples/search required Custody Officer should consider bail once achieved

Consider impact of crime/incident, including view of the victim, community impact, and public interest. Ensure that the victim compliance code is considered Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales (Victims' Code) - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Consider street bail (s30A PACE) where arrest is necessary but detention may not be required.

