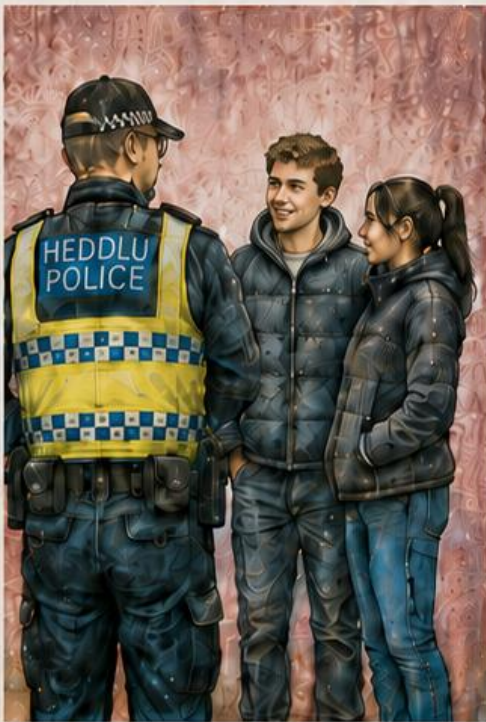


Children and Policing in England and Wales: Adopting a Child First Approach

Frontline Policing and Children: Towards a Child First Approach in Practice



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Glossary

AAs – Appropriate adults
ACEs – Adverse childhood experiences
APP – Authorised professional practice
BWV – Body-worn video
CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CAP – Care action plan
CIW – Care Inspectorate Wales
CCU – Custody Coordination Unit
DBS – Disclosure and Barring Service
DSCC – Defence Solicitor Call Centre
EDT – Emergency duty team
EH – Early Help
GMCA – Greater Manchester Combined Authority
GMP – Greater Manchester Police
HMICFRS – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services
HMIP – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation
MASH – Multi-agency safeguarding hub
MASM – Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements meeting
MPS – Metropolitan Police Service
NPCC – National Police Chiefs’ Council
NYAS – National Youth Advocacy Service
ONS – Office for National Statistics
OOCRs – Out-of-court resolutions
PACE – Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984
PCSO – Police community support officer
PNC – Police National Computer
PPIED – Prevention, prosecution, intervention, education and diversion
PPN – Public protection notice
RCRP – Right Care, Right Person
SWP – South Wales Police
UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
VA – Voluntary attendance
YJB – Youth Justice Board
YJS – Youth justice services

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

Child First is now the guiding principle of the youth justice system in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board 2022). Child First approaches require children to be treated as children, their needs and capacities to be accommodated and their active participation and wider social inclusion fostered. The focus is on prevention and diversion wherever appropriate and on minimal intervention to reduce the stigmatising effects of contact with the criminal justice system (Case and Browning 2021). These same principles underpin the Government's vision for a reformed youth justice system, as set out in its White Paper (Ministry of Justice 2026:1.23ff). While Child First principles are increasingly embedded in youth justice services (Crest Advisory 2025), they are much less well established in the frontline police encounters that determine whether a child enters the formal criminal justice system at all. This report examines that gap and why it matters.

Child First principles are increasingly reflected in national policing policy. The National Police Chiefs' Council's (NPCC 2024a) *Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy 2024–2027* states that all under-18s must be treated as children, with their needs, vulnerabilities and diversity recognised, irrespective of their apparent maturity. The NPCC's *Children and Young Persons Policing Charter* (NPCC 2025a) similarly commits forces to embedding child-centred practice across policing, promoting diversionary activity, and ensuring that staff receive relevant training. For frontline policing, these commitments are important because officers on response and neighbourhood teams make the decisions that determine whether children are stopped, searched, arrested, diverted, supported, or drawn into the formal justice system. This report examines whether those national commitments are yet reflected in everyday frontline encounters with children.

This report is one of two main reports from the Nuffield Foundation-funded programme on children and policing. It is the most comprehensive study in England and Wales to examine the frontline policing of children aged 10 to 17. A companion report, *Children in police custody: The case for Child First reform*, examines mechanisms for improving the treatment of children in police custody (Kemp and Bevan 2026a). The frontline research involved scoping studies of police interactions with children in two force areas: Greater Manchester Police (GMP) and South Wales Police (SWP). Findings from each force have also been published separately in force-specific reports (Kemp and Bevan 2025; 2026b). The wider programme also includes a statistical analysis of electronic custody record data (Kent and others 2026), an overarching summary report and recommendations (Kemp, Bevan and Kent 2026), and an accompanying Child First Custody Toolkit (Bevan and Kemp 2026a), all of which are available via the [Nuffield Foundation project webpage](#).

The frontline policing research grew out of an earlier study of children in police custody, which raised a fundamental question: why were some children there at all, particularly where the alleged offending was minor or low-level? This report therefore explores how frontline decisions about children are made, what information officers have available, what alternatives to arrest and custody exist, and what welfare and partner-agency support officers can access when deciding how to respond.

Across the GMP and SWP scoping studies, the research included observations of 25 frontline policing shifts, 117 interviews with frontline officers, supervisors and partner agencies, reviews of 80 stop and search body-worn video (BWV) recordings, children's own accounts, and quantitative analysis of stop and search and custody data. The analysis also draws on learning from police custody research conducted with two further forces, Surrey Police and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS).

Children are not peripheral to this research but at the heart of it. Across the wider programme, the research team heard directly from 82 children and young people with experience of police contact. Their accounts, alongside case studies drawn from police custody and the review of BWV footage, provide what large-scale studies of policing rarely capture: what encounters with the police feel like, what follows from them, and what they can mean for a child's education, relationships, sense of fairness and aspirations for the future. What children have said points to the same conclusion: that Child First has not yet reached the interactions that matter most to them.

2. A young and untrained workforce

The delivery of Child First policing depends on officers having the knowledge, confidence and skills to engage effectively with children. Yet frontline policing is now often carried out by response teams with high levels of inexperience and little or no child-specific training. Supervising sergeants across both scoping forces estimated that around 60 to 70% of response officers had three years' service or fewer, consistent with national data showing officers with five or fewer years' service now accounting for 32% of the total workforce (Home Office 2025a), rising as high as 80% in some response teams (Gloucestershire Police Federation 2023).

This matters because response officers are often making the most consequential decisions about children: whether to stop and search, whether to arrest, whether to use voluntary attendance, whether to divert, and how to respond when a child is encountered in circumstances of welfare need or crisis. These decisions require communication, judgement and de-escalation skills that are difficult to develop without experience, supervision and child-specific training.

Across both forces, no frontline officer reported receiving focused training on child brain development, neurodiversity, communicating effectively with children, child-specific de-escalation, or disproportionality and bias in decision-making about children. Only two frontline officers had heard of Child First or child-centred policing as formal approaches. In the absence of training, officers described falling back on parenting experience or child-specific skills acquired in previous occupations. That produces unjustifiable inconsistency in how children are understood and treated.

This is not a criticism of individual officers. It is a workforce and training issue. Officers are being asked to make complex, high-stakes decisions about children without the child-specific knowledge, guidance and organisational support required to make those decisions well.

Recommendations 1 and 2 call for mandatory child-specific training for frontline officers and supervisors, and for forces to identify and make better use of existing child-specific expertise within frontline teams.

3. Frontline policing interactions with children

Chapter 3 examines direct encounters between children and frontline officers, focusing particularly on stop and search. For many children, this is their first significant interaction with the police. It is also one of the most intrusive powers available to frontline officers and one of the least supervised. The evidence reviewed for this study shows that, while many officers interacted with children politely and professionally, the quality of encounters varied significantly.

The lack of training was evident in the interactions observed and reviewed in this study, and was also reflected in participants' accounts. The majority of officers did their best to interact with children in an accessible and positive way and there were some excellent examples, across the forces, of officers engaging with real skill and empathy. However, there was significant variability, particularly on response teams working in high-pressure environments. The BWV footage review revealed a number of poor interactions (across both forces) where officers treated children in a wholly adult manner,

failed to explain the grounds for the search, or responded to questions with threats rather than explanations.

The requirement to record self-defined ethnicity was almost entirely overlooked in both forces. Children's accounts reinforce the importance of communication, explanation and fairness. Children described the impact of being treated as suspects rather than as children, and Black and mixed heritage children described feeling stereotyped and disproportionately targeted. Searches based primarily on a child's presence in a designated hotspot area, often in communities experiencing high levels of deprivation, risk making police contact a routine feature of childhood for the children most visible to the police.

Both forces had already begun to strengthen scrutiny of stop and search. GMP has developed external scrutiny arrangements, including youth-led scrutiny panels, while SWP has introduced additional review processes, including the use of its iPatrol app, supervisory review and enhanced scrutiny of searches involving children from ethnic minority backgrounds. These developments are important, but the evidence points to the need for clearer child-specific guidance nationally, and for better supervision and scrutiny arrangements that consistently include children's experiences and perspectives.

Recommendations 3 to 6 call for child-specific guidance and training on stop and search, scrutiny arrangements that involve children and young people, performance indicators that capture the quality and impact of encounters, and improved recording of ethnicity.

4. Unmet welfare needs driving police contact

Across the forces studied, much frontline police contact with children arose not from suspected offending, but from welfare and safeguarding concerns: children reported missing, children in local authority care, mental health crisis, placement breakdown, family conflict and the absence of timely support from other agencies. Officers were often trying to manage situations for which policing is neither primarily responsible nor adequately equipped.

In practice, with police response teams operating on a 24/7 basis, the police have become the default out-of-hours response for many children in difficulty, and this was particularly evident in relation to looked after children.¹ Officers described receiving late Friday afternoon referrals as social care teams left for the weekend, being asked to enforce curfews when children in care returned late, attending incidents in residential placements, and trying to secure support for children in crisis when children's social care, mental health services or suitable alternative accommodation were unavailable. In some cases, children were arrested and taken to the police station, not because their detention was necessary for a criminal investigation or because such an investigation was likely to be pursued, but because no other agency response was available. Incidents in residential care that would not warrant police involvement in a family home also resulted in police intervention, arrest and/or detention. Police custody was being used, effectively, as a place of safety.

Children reported missing from care were also brought into repeated contact with officers, often where the underlying concern was welfare, exploitation or placement instability. Such contact with the police can be stigmatising, undermine children's trust and confidence in the police, and lead to unnecessary criminalisation (Howard League for Penal Reform 2017; Leyland 2024). Officers often felt they became viewed as the 'bad guys' as a result. Consequently, some of the most vulnerable children experience policing not as protection or support, but as repeated enforcement. These concerns have also been identified in recent work on reducing the risk of criminal justice involvement for children in contact with the social care system (Whitehead and others 2025).

¹ A looked after child is a child in local authority care or accommodation (s22 Children Act 1989).

Frontline officers cannot deliver Child First policing if they are left to manage unmet welfare need without timely support from children's services, youth justice services (YJS), mental health provision or suitable alternative accommodation. Arrest and detention have a lasting impact on a child's life chances. Police custody must not be used as a substitute for a safe place for a child to go. A Child First approach requires partner agencies to be available when decisions are being made, not only after a child has already been arrested or detained.

Recommendations 7 to 9 call for child-specific protocols between police and partner agencies, a national framework to reduce unnecessary police contact with looked after children, and improved out-of-hours access to children's social care, mental health support and appropriate alternative accommodation.

5. Decision-making and alternatives to arrest

When a child comes to police attention as a potential suspect, the arrest decision is the moment that sets everything else in motion. Analysis of custody record data from five forces over the 12 months to March 2023 found that 60.7% of children taken into police custody received no further action (NFA) (Kent and others 2026). This does not mean that every arrest resulting in NFA was inappropriate, but the scale of the figure raises serious questions about whether arrest was always necessary and proportionate, and whether officers are being given clear, practical alternatives when making decisions at the point of arrest.

Alternatives to arrest and detention are available where criminal investigation is required. However, these were under-used across the forces, predominantly because officers did not have the training, operational guidance or confidence to use them. Voluntary attendance under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) section 29, for example, requires officers to arrange an appropriate adult, ensure legal advice is offered, consider the child's health and welfare, and record the process properly. It is easier for officers to arrest the child and allow custody officers to take on those duties. In some forces, the absence of reliable voluntary attendance data also makes it difficult to understand how often alternatives to arrest are being used. Without clear operational guidance, officers may default to arrest because it is the route they know how to use.

Innovation is emerging, but it also shows why national guidance at the operational level is needed. Some forces are exploring app-based or contemporaneous interviewing to avoid taking children into custody. Used carefully, these approaches may reduce unnecessary detention. Used poorly, they risk weakening safeguards if interviews take place on the street or in other informal settings without effective access to legal advice, an appropriate adult, or proper welfare checks. SWP's use of voluntary attendance sergeants, responsible for logging voluntary attendances and overseeing compliance with legal requirements, provides one example of how forces can make alternatives to arrest more workable.

The reasons for the default to arrest are structural rather than individual. Frontline officers, particularly on response, often operate within systems that make arrest the path of least resistance. In the English forces studied, officers described performance frameworks and institutional messaging that appeared to prioritise enforcement activity, including arrests and stop and search, while prevention and diversion work was less visible and less easily counted. This was less evident in the Welsh force studied, where officers did not describe the same pressure to meet arrest or stop and search expectations. These differences suggest that organisational culture and performance frameworks can shape whether officers feel able to consider alternatives to arrest.

Even in Wales, however, officers described feeling under pressure to arrest where incidents were labelled as domestic abuse. Domestic abuse positive action policies are an underexamined but significant driver of child arrests, particularly where the incident involves a child and parent, the

alleged conduct is minor, and no complaint is forthcoming. In these circumstances, arrest may be treated as a policy requirement, even though the law requires the exercise of discretion. Child-specific guidance is needed to prevent children being unfairly drawn into the criminal justice system through policies designed primarily with adult suspects in mind.

The recommendations therefore focus on reducing unnecessary child arrests in two ways:

Recommendations 10 to 14 address the legal and operational routes by which children can be diverted away from arrest where it is not necessary. They call for reform of PACE Codes G and C, clearer guidance on voluntary attendance, contemporaneous and app-based interviewing, street bail under PACE section 30A, and other less intrusive alternatives.

Recommendations 15 to 19 address the organisational and cultural drivers of unnecessary child arrests. They call for child-specific performance indicators, a review of domestic abuse positive action policies as they apply to children, and supervisory authorisation of child arrests.

The report also provides practical tools to support implementation. Annex B includes supervisory guidance on child arrests and a decision-making flowchart prioritising less intrusive alternatives to arrest, arising from the research with GMP. Updated versions of these tools are available in the accompanying [Child First Custody Toolkit](#).

6. Diversion and out-of-court resolutions

Where children come into contact with the police for suspected offending, a Child First approach requires minimum intervention and diversion wherever appropriate. Yet the evidence shows that diversionary opportunities are not being used consistently. Nationally, the use of out-of-court resolutions (OOCRs) for children has declined significantly, and frontline officers often lack a clear understanding of the options available, the criteria for using them, and what happens after a referral is made. This is not solely a consequence of the overall fall in child arrests: within the custody data, OOCRs fell from 26% of outcomes in 2009 to 11% in 2023, while NFA outcomes rose from 32% to 61%.

OOCRs are not always consequence-free. Even informal outcomes, such as community resolutions, can have implications for a child, including potential disclosure on an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. Children and families may not always understand these consequences, and officers may themselves be uncertain about the longer-term implications of different disposals. This makes clear guidance, explanation and informed participation particularly important.

The research also found that diversion processes can be slow and disconnected from the point of police contact. YJS often become involved only after a referral for diversion has been made, rather than informing the referral decision or the consideration of other less formal processes that the police can apply, such as restorative justice or a community resolution. Frontline officers described receiving little feedback about what happened after referral, which limits learning and can reinforce uncertainty about diversionary pathways.

These issues have particular implications for racial disproportionality. Black and mixed heritage children are less likely than their White peers to receive diversionary outcomes and are more likely to receive more severe criminal justice outcomes, even where they have committed similar offences (Brodie and others 2025). A Child First approach requires diversionary decision-making to be transparent, consistent and actively monitored, so that children are not drawn further into the criminal justice system as a result of their ethnicity, differences in local practice or a lack of knowledge on the part of the officer dealing with their case.

Recommendations 20 to 22 endorse the Government's proposal for a clearer national framework for OOCRs involving children, call for Outcome 22 to be recognised as a positive resolution, propose a

faster and more proportionate route for low-level cases, and seek clearer timescales, feedback and accountability within youth justice referral processes.

7. Multi-agency welfare responses and voluntary support

There is substantial multi-agency infrastructure available to children who come to police attention, including referral routes into safeguarding hubs, Early Help, Turnaround, local prevention initiatives and YJS. On paper, this should provide a strong basis for Child First policing. In practice, however, much of this infrastructure is invisible or unavailable to frontline officers at the point when decisions about children are being made.

Welfare referral forms disappear into what officers themselves described as a black hole with little or no feedback, no visible outcome and no basis for understanding what happened to the child or whether the referral made a difference. This means that officers may know a child has welfare needs, but lack the information, advice or partner agency support needed to respond differently. It also prevents officers from learning which routes are effective and from building confidence in alternatives to arrest or formal criminal justice intervention.

The research also shows that support can become less available once a child crosses from the welfare track into the criminal justice track. Children who are already known to exploitation teams, children's services, Early Help or YJS may find that support recedes once an offence is alleged or an investigation begins. In some other cases, criminal justice contact becomes the mechanism through which unmet welfare need finally comes to attention. This is a poor substitute for early support.

The evidence base points clearly towards minimum intervention and maximum diversion, particularly for first-time entrants, reflecting McAra and McVie's (2007a) finding that early formal contact with the criminal justice system can entrench rather than reduce offending. Yet this sits in tension with a system in which police officers, as law enforcement practitioners, are often placed at the centre of decisions about what should happen to children. Child First training can help, but training alone is not enough. Youth justice and child welfare expertise need to be available earlier, at the point when frontline decisions are being made.

Recommendations 23 to 26 call for structured access to youth justice specialist advice at the point of arrest, accessible local information for officers about child and family support, earlier and more meaningful youth justice involvement in diversion decisions, and a funded pilot of youth justice on-call support for frontline officers.

8. Towards Child First frontline policing

The findings of this report do not suggest that nothing should happen when children come to police attention. They show that what happens should be proportionate, prompt and connected to the child's actual circumstances. For some children, the right response may be an apology, reparation, or informal action. For some children arrest and detention may be appropriate. For others, particularly where offending reflects exploitation, trauma or entrenched disadvantage, early youth justice or welfare support may be needed. The current system too often brings that expertise in only after key decisions have already been made.

Children's accounts show that the harms of police contact are not limited to formal outcomes. Even where a case ultimately results in no further action, a diversionary outcome or acquittal, the experience of being searched, arrested, held for hours in a police cell, interviewed, investigated, or bailed with conditions that might exclude the child from education, can have lasting effects. Children described these experiences as frightening, confusing and traumatic, particularly where they did not understand what was happening or why. Several children described the impact of police contact on

schooling, peer relationships, reputation and future aspirations. These accounts reinforce the need to look not only at outcomes, but at the processes through which children experience policing.

There are also signs that change is possible. In GMP, officers reported that supervisory authorisation of child arrests had contributed to substantial reductions in child custody detentions. Youth justice statistics show that arrests of 10- to 17-year-olds in GMP fell by 12.5% between the year ending March 2024 and the year ending March 2025 (Youth Justice Board 2026a). In SWP, custody officers' increased willingness to refuse detention was beginning to send a message to frontline officers that arrest should not be assumed to lead to detention. The MPS Child First custody pilot points in the same direction: when officers are given a clear framework and expected to use it, practice changes.

Children's experiences must also be heard directly if Child First policing is to be meaningful in practice. The research shows that children often feel unheard during police encounters, uncertain about their rights and unsure how to raise concerns afterwards. Of the 45 children and young people who completed the questionnaire, 34 (76%) said that they had wanted to complain about the way they were treated by the police but had not done so, commonly because they did not know how to complain, were not given an opportunity to do so, or did not believe that anything would change. Without routine mechanisms for hearing from children, forces are left to assess the quality and impact of police encounters largely without the voices of those most affected by them.

Recommendation 27 calls for children with experience of stop and search and arrest to be actively involved as stakeholders in the development and implementation of Child First reforms, including the design of training, the development of guidance and the scrutiny of police practice. It also calls for simple, accessible mechanisms for children to provide feedback and make complaints following police encounters. A QR code provided at the conclusion of a stop and search or arrest encounter, linking to an accessible feedback and complaints process, would be a practical and low-cost first step. Government should consider whether a statutory requirement is needed to ensure children are given accessible information about their right to complain in a format they can act on.

Taken together, the findings show that Child First policing cannot depend on individual officer goodwill alone. It requires training, guidance, supervision, partner agency support and accountability mechanisms that enable frontline officers to make child-centred decisions in real time. The reforms proposed in this report are intended to move Child First from policy aspiration to everyday frontline practice, so that children are treated as children at the point of police contact, not only after they have entered the youth justice system.

Summary of recommendations for frontline policing

Developing the skills for Child First policing

- Recommendation 1: Introduce nationally mandated, regularly refreshed child-specific training for all frontline officers and staff who come into contact with children.
- Recommendation 2: Audit and make better use of existing child-specific expertise within frontline teams through champion roles, shadowing, secondments and on-patrol supervision.

Frontline interactions and stop and search

- Recommendation 3: Develop national child-specific guidance and training on the stop and search of children.
- Recommendation 4: Establish stop and search scrutiny panels involving children and young people with direct experience of the power.
- Recommendation 5: Introduce child-specific stop and search performance indicators, including positive outcome rates disaggregated by ethnicity.
- Recommendation 6: Update officer-defined ethnicity codes to align with current ONS Census categories and improve the recording of children's self-defined ethnicity.

Welfare needs and partner-agency responses

- Recommendation 7: Require every force to develop a child-specific protocol with local authorities, health services and youth justice services for responding to welfare-related incidents.
- Recommendation 8: Establish a national framework to reduce unnecessary police contact with looked after children, particularly in residential placements.
- Recommendation 9: Improve out-of-hours access to children's social care, mental health services and suitable alternative accommodation.

Decision-making and alternatives to arrest

- Recommendation 10: Amend PACE Codes G and C so that the distinct legal position, rights and best interests of children are properly reflected in arrest and detention decisions.
- Recommendation 11: Introduce a structured presumption in favour of voluntary attendance for children where arrest is not necessary.
- Recommendation 12: Ensure consistent national recording and public reporting of voluntary attendance data involving children.
- Recommendation 13: Issue national guidance on contemporaneous and app-based interviewing of children, including the safeguards that must be provided.
- Recommendation 14: Update national guidance and training on the use of street bail as an alternative to taking a child into custody.
- Recommendation 15: Develop performance indicators for the policing of children that recognise diversion, voluntary attendance and other examples of good Child First practice, rather than relying on arrest and enforcement activity.
- Recommendation 16: Embed Child First principles in force strategies, leadership communications and performance expectations.
- Recommendation 17: Review the application of domestic abuse positive action policies to children, particularly those aged 16 and 17, so that arrest is not treated as automatic.

- Recommendation 18: Require supervisory authorisation, wherever practicable, before a child is arrested and taken into police custody.
- Recommendation 19: Provide frontline officers with clear operational guidance and a decision-making flowchart covering less intrusive alternatives to arrest.

Diversion and out-of-court resolutions

- Recommendation 20: Establish a clearer national framework for children's out-of-court resolutions and recognise Outcome 22 as a positive outcome where it represents genuine diversion or intervention.
- Recommendation 21: Introduce a fast-track pathway for low-level offending so that proportionate resolutions and support can be put in place promptly.
- Recommendation 22: Set target timescales for youth justice referrals and assessments and establish a feedback loop to frontline officers.

Youth justice and local support at the point of arrest

- Recommendation 23: Give frontline officers structured access to youth justice specialist information and advice at the point when arrest is being considered.
- Recommendation 24: Provide frontline officers with accessible and regularly updated local information about child and family support services.
- Recommendation 25: Involve youth justice services earlier and more meaningfully in decisions about diversion.
- Recommendation 26: Fund and evaluate a pilot of youth justice on-call support for frontline officers.

Children's participation and accountability

- Recommendation 27: Involve children with experience of stop and search and arrest as stakeholders in the design, implementation and scrutiny of Child First reforms, and provide accessible ways for children to give feedback or make complaints.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In England and Wales, Child First is currently the guiding principle of the youth justice system, as set out by the Youth Justice Board (YJB 2022). Based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Child First requires children to be treated as children, so that their best interests are prioritised and their particular needs and capacities are recognised. Child First approaches encourage children's active participation and wider social inclusion, and require a focus on prevention, diversion and minimal intervention to reduce the stigmatising effects of contact with the criminal justice system (Case and Browning 2021). These same principles underpin the Government's vision for a reformed youth justice system, set out in the White Paper, *Cutting Youth Crime. Changing Young Lives* (Ministry of Justice 2026: 1.23ff). While Child First already informs and shapes the policy and practice of youth justice services (YJS), it is much less well embedded in policing practice (Kemp and others 2023). Nor does it yet shape the legislation and guidance that frame police powers, the legal protections children are entitled to expect, or the early involvement of other agencies whose presence can determine the outcome of an encounter. This report examines that gap between principle and practice, and why it matters: for children, for a police service that has pledged to put them first, and for a government committed to building a youth justice system that does the same (Ministry of Justice 2026).

This programme of research, [*Children and Policing in England and Wales: Adopting a Child First Approach*](#), builds on an earlier study that examined the impact of legislation and guidance on children detained for questioning by the police (Kemp and others 2023). Both projects have been funded by the Nuffield Foundation.² The earlier study comprised 32 in-depth case studies, which involved engaging with children while held in detention and interviewing practitioners working with them: custody officers, police investigators, appropriate adults (AAs) and lawyers. It also included an analysis of electronic custody records drawn from eight forces in England and Wales over two months (March and September) during 2019, 2020 and 2021: a total of 51,504 records of which 3,722 (7%) related to children.

While the first study focused primarily on improving the treatment of children following arrest and detention, in examining what happened to children in police custody, a persistent question emerged: why were some of them there at all? Children suspected of involvement in minor or low-level offending were being brought into custody in circumstances where alternatives would have been more appropriate and more consistent with a Child First approach. At the same time, custody was sometimes the only available option, particularly overnight, where the police were unable to engage support from children's services and YJS. Instead, a child was brought into police custody because a cell was the only place available to hold them safely. These findings highlighted the importance of examining police decisions that precede detention, and the frontline interactions that shape whether, and how, children enter the formal and adversarial criminal process.

This report is one of two main reports from the Nuffield Foundation-funded programme on children and policing. A companion report, *Children in police custody: The case for Child First reform*, examines mechanisms for improving the treatment of children in police custody, including more robust decisions to authorise detention, the enhanced role of custody inspectors, child-specialist legal safeguards, and reduced detention periods for children (Kemp and Bevan 2026a). The frontline research included scoping studies of police interactions with children in two force areas: Greater Manchester Police (GMP) and South Wales Police (SWP). The findings from each force have also been published separately in area reports (Kemp and Bevan 2025; 2026b). The programme also includes a statistical analysis of electronic custody record data (Kent and others 2026), an overarching summary

² The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Nuffield Foundation.

report (Kemp and others 2026), and an accompanying Child First Custody Toolkit, all of which are available via the [Nuffield Foundation's webpage](#).

Children are not peripheral to this research but at the heart of it. Their testimonies, gathered in individual interviews and focus groups, provide what large-scale studies of policing rarely capture: what those encounters with the police feel like, what follows from them, and what they can mean for how a child is seen, for their education, and for their aspirations for the future.

The analysis examines frontline decisions to stop and search, arrest or use alternatives, including voluntary attendance, under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE), diversion and out-of-court resolutions (OOCRs), alongside police responses to children in the context of social welfare concerns. In light of the challenges observed, it considers mechanisms to improve frontline decision-making, including the use of structured guidance tools and supervisory oversight of arrest. It also identifies the other conditions required to ensure that frontline officers can act in the child's best interests and avoid unnecessary police contact and criminalisation, including YJS and local authority input, child-specific Right Care, Right Person (RCRP) pathways, and the availability of appropriate alternative accommodation to avoid a child being placed in a police cell.

The following sections set out the Child First framework and its relevance to policing in England and Wales, and situate the findings within the national landscape of policing children. The discussion then examines patterns of child arrests, the transformation of frontline policing over recent years, and, more recently, the implications of wider government reform priorities.

Child First in Policing

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 led to major reforms of the youth justice system, with the adoption of a risk-based approach at its core. This punitive direction prompted significant pushback in academic and policy thinking, particularly in Wales, where 'Child First' principles were first articulated by Haines and Drakeford (1998) as a direct challenge to the risk- and offence-focused approaches that had come to dominate youth justice. Case and Browning (2021) subsequently consolidated the evidence base, presenting a framework with four tenets. The first requires practitioners to treat children as children, prioritising their best interests, recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential and acknowledging the structural barriers children face. The second promotes the building of the child's pro-social identity through constructive and future-focused work, built on supportive relationships that empower children. The third tenet requires collaboration with children, encouraging their active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. The final tenet aims to divert children from stigma, promoting pre-emptive prevention, diversion and minimal intervention – "a childhood removed from the justice system" (YJB 2022). The approach draws heavily on the child's rights under the UNCRC, particularly Articles 3, 37 and 40, and on McAra and McVie's longitudinal *Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime* (2005; 2007a; 2007b; 2010; 2012; 2015) which identified formal system contact as a highly influential risk factor for reoffending. Child First has been adopted by the YJB as the guiding principle of the youth justice system (YJB 2022).

Research consistently shows that arrest and formal involvement in the justice system are more likely to increase than prevent offending (McAra and McVie 2007a; Smith 2025), and that harsh detention experiences can be particularly damaging for children and for their relationships with the police and wider justice system (Kemp and others 2023; Bevan 2024). Greater awareness of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed approaches is encouraging forces to adopt more child-centred policies, although Child First remains less embedded in policing practice (Kemp and others 2023) than in later stages of the youth justice system (Crest Advisory 2025). Inevitably some policing roles and interactions will offer limited scope for engaging all of the Child First principles, by virtue of

the brief nature of the interaction or the point in the criminal process at which the child is encountered.

Child First is nonetheless finding increasing expression within policing. The National Police Chiefs' Council's (NPCC) (2024a) *Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy 2024–2027* states that all under 18-year-olds must be "treated as children, respecting and recognising their needs, vulnerabilities and diversity, irrespective of presented or assumed levels of maturity and age." The NPCC's *Children and Young Persons Policing Charter* (2025a) sets out a series of pledges for forces, including embedding child-centred practice across all departments, delivering a child-centred custody experience, promoting diversionary activity, and ensuring relevant staff receive trauma-informed training. Together, these frameworks signal clear expectations for how forces should engage with children, reflecting key Child First principles.

There remain significant debates regarding the meaning of Child First, its implementation and its relationship with wider children's rights frameworks (Smithson and Burns forthcoming). This research does not seek to evaluate Child First as a youth justice philosophy. Rather, it examines how the key principles associated with Child First can inform policing to improve children's interactions with the police.

Policing Children: The National Picture

While examining frontline officers' encounters with children, it is important to note that there has over recent years been a significant reduction in the number of children arrested and detained by the police. Indeed, there was a 74% fall in child arrest rates over the ten years to March 2020 (YJB/Ministry of Justice 2021), driven in part by the shift towards voluntary interviews outside custody following the 2008 financial crisis (Kemp 2020). This downward trend began to slow in subsequent years, with arrests increasing by 7% in the year ending March 2022 and by a further 9% in the year ending March 2023. Rates then stabilised in the following year, before falling by 2% in the year ending March 2025. Despite these recent fluctuations, over the ten years to March 2025 there has been a 38% reduction in child arrests across England and Wales (YJB 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026a).

However, our custody report shows that, even where children are still taken into police custody, many leave without any formal criminal justice outcome. In the five forces examined, in the year ending March 2023, 60.7% of children taken into police custody had no further action recorded at the end of detention (Kent and others 2026). This raises serious questions about the necessity and proportionality of custody in many cases, and underlines the importance of less intrusive alternatives wherever arrest and detention are not strictly necessary.

These trends need to be understood alongside wider changes in the frontline policing workforce. Cuts to policing budgets from 2012 onwards led to around 20,000 experienced officers leaving policing. In combination with the then Government's manifesto target in 2019 to recruit 20,000 police officers in England and Wales, this has created a young-in-service and relatively inexperienced frontline workforce, contributing to ongoing problems in the recruitment and retention of officers (Home Office 2023; 2025a).

Most officers recruited from 2019 onwards were initially deployed to frontline response roles and, while some have since moved on, response teams continue to experience high turnover as newer officers seek to move into specialist policing roles. Neighbourhood policing teams also operate on the frontline. These roles, which typically avoid night shifts, tend to attract older, more experienced officers with families (Kemp and Bevan 2025). The Government's [Safer Streets Mission](#) is increasing the number of neighbourhood officers and while this change is welcome, it will further deplete the pool of experienced officers available for frontline response duties.

Taken together, these developments raise important questions regarding how decisions about children are made in contemporary policing, particularly when stopped and searched and at the point of arrest, and whether those decisions reflect a genuinely Child First approach. It is these questions that this report sets out to address.

The research programme

This research programme is distinctive in that it takes an explicitly practice and policy-focused approach. It builds on the findings from the first study to explore whether, and how, a Child First approach can be taken by police forces, both on the frontline and in police custody, to improve children's experience of policing. At the same time the researchers have worked collaboratively with forces, practitioners and policy-makers to explore local and national mechanisms for developing and embedding a Child First approach. The objectives of the research were:

1. Identifying how the police can be enabled to make Child First decisions in the investigative phases of their work.
2. Identifying how the police can work with external partners to better enable diversion and support for the child.
3. Identifying how a Child First approach can be implemented in police custody.
4. Producing materials for the national adoption of a Child First approach in investigative decision-making and police custody.
5. Engaging with policymakers to advance a Child First agenda and providing the tools to do so.

Methods

In both GMP and SWP, researchers conducted interviews and observed officers on response and neighbourhood shifts, including by 'riding along' with officers attending calls. The shifts observed, across two geographical areas within each force, were selected to cover a range of times, including early, day and night shifts, and days of the week. Interview participants were recruited to reflect a range of roles, experience levels and ranks. Interviews were conducted individually, lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and were audio recorded with consent. Interviews were also conducted with officers in specialist policing teams and roles, and with officers seconded to YJS. Additionally, partner agencies, particularly YJS and relevant children's services teams, were contacted and interviews conducted wherever possible.

Across both force areas, 117 semi-structured interviews were conducted in total. In GMP, there were 56 interviews: 37 with frontline officers (31 police constables (PCs), 3 sergeants (Sgts), 2 inspectors (Insp) and 1 chief inspector (CI)), 15 with officers in specialist policing teams and roles, and 4 with youth justice services (YJS). In SWP, 61 interviews were conducted: 45 with frontline officers (31 PCs, 7 police community support officers (PCSOs), 6 Sgts and 1 Insp), 11 with officers in specialist policing teams and roles, and 5 with partner agencies, including YJS, Early Help (EH), National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) and youth workers. An overview of the fieldwork is outlined in Annex A.

Throughout, interactions with children were evaluated through a Child First lens, asking whether children were treated as children, whether their particular needs and capacities were accommodated, whether they were supported to participate effectively and exercise their rights, and whether the focus was on diversion wherever appropriate.

Body-worn video footage of stop and search incidents

A review of BWV footage of stop and search incidents was undertaken across the two forces studied - 40 in each. In GMP, 23 BWVs were reviewed in Area 1 and 17 in Area 2, including 73 children in total. The majority were boys aged 14 to 17 years, with 15 girls. Ethnicity is reported using the categories

recorded in the BWV review data: most children were White, with 7 Black and 7 Asian children. In SWP, 40 BWV recordings were reviewed, 20 in each of the two districts studied, including 56 children in total. Most were boys aged 16 or 17 years; six were girls. Most were White, while eight were Black, five Asian and two were of mixed ethnicity.

BWV footage was reviewed using a structured analytical framework examining officer-child interactions, grounds for search, use of force, and compliance with legal requirements including the provision of required information and the recording of self-defined ethnicity.

Children's accounts

Children's accounts presented in this report were gathered through focus groups and individual interviews with 51 children and young people across England and Wales by Sphear Media, a creative production and social impact organisation specialising in participatory engagement and peer-led research. Forty-five participants also completed a questionnaire, the responses to which are included in this analysis. Participants were drawn from Newham and Brixton in London, Salford and Stockport in Greater Manchester, and Cardiff. The children and young people involved had varying levels of contact with the police and criminal justice system, ranging from those with little or no direct police contact to those with repeated experience of stop and search, arrest, police custody and court involvement. The sample was mainly aged between 14 and 17 years, although it included younger children and a small number of young adults, predominantly aged 18 to 20. The earlier England-based engagement included only one female participant, while the Cardiff fieldwork added four further female participants, bringing important additional perspectives from girls and young women with experience of repeated police contact and custody. The sample was ethnically diverse, though the profile varied by location. Around three-quarters of the participants in the England sample identified as Black or mixed heritage, while the Cardiff participants were predominantly White. The interviews and questionnaire covered experiences of police contact and custody, perceptions of fairness and respect, understanding of rights, access to support, complaints processes and the impact of police encounters on attitudes towards the police.

Coding and anonymity

To preserve anonymity, interview citations of police officers and partner agencies are coded by force area (GMP or SWP), followed by a number denoting the district where the interview took place (1 or 2) where relevant, an abbreviation of the participant's role, and a number assigned chronologically. The letter N indicates an officer from a neighbourhood team; where no N appears, the officer is from a response team. All PCSOs in this study were based in neighbourhood teams. Partner agency participants are identified by an abbreviated agency name, with a number distinguishing between individuals where more than one participant from the same agency is cited.

Examples drawn from the review of body-worn video footage are identified using the prefix BWV, followed by G for Greater Manchester Police or S for South Wales Police and the recording number, for example BWV-G19 or BWV-S12.

References to interviews and questionnaire findings generated through the Sphear Media engagement work use the prefix SM followed by a number identifying the participant group: SM1 (Newham), SM2 (Brixton), SM3 (Salford), SM4 (Stockport School), SM5 (Stockport YJS), SM6 (Cardiff boys) and SM7 (Cardiff girls). Where comments are attributed to an individual participant, a further numerical identifier is used, for example SM1.3 or SM4.1. In some group discussions it was not possible to attribute comments to a specific participant and quotations are therefore identified only by participant group.

Quantitative data

The wider programme included a research-led analysis of electronic custody record data provided by seven police forces (Kent and others 2026). Five forces were able to provide data for an overlapping 12-month period, from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, which were combined for the main analysis. This dataset included 71,381 individuals detained in custody for a PACE offence, comprising 61,224 adults, 3,868 vulnerable adults and 6,289 children. Data from two further forces, provided for shorter time periods or with additional variables, were used to provide further contextual information.

In addition, custody record data were provided by the four forces studied in the wider programme to support analysis of the impact of local changes in practice. For GMP, this included force-wide custody data from April 2023 to January 2024, alongside 435 child stop and search incidents recorded in Areas 1 and 2 in January and February 2024. For SWP, this included force-wide custody data covering 2023, 2024 and 2025. Data were also analysed in relation to changes introduced in Surrey Police and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). The quantitative analysis was undertaken by Dr Hope Kent, University of Nottingham.

Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded with consent, transcribed and coded thematically using NVivo. Observations were documented through contemporaneous field notes and coded thematically alongside the interview data. The BWV review data were also coded thematically, alongside structured recording of key features of each encounter, including the grounds for the stop and search, the child's age, gender and ethnicity where available, the use of handcuffs or force, the quality of the explanation given to the child, and the outcome of the encounter. Children's accounts from the Sphear Media engagement work were analysed thematically, with attention to children's experiences of police contact, their understanding of their rights, their perceptions of fairness and respect, and the impact of police encounters on their views of the police and themselves.

Qualitative data from interviews, observations, children's accounts and BWV review were analysed alongside the quantitative data to examine patterns in frontline decision-making, police contact, custody entry and the use of alternatives to arrest and detention. This combined analysis allowed the research team to consider not only what decisions were being made, but how officers understood those decisions, how children experienced them, and how local practice was shaped by organisational culture, available alternatives and wider system pressures.

Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee, University of Nottingham on 3 November 2022, building on the ethics framework developed for the earlier Nuffield-funded study (Kemp and others 2023). Data Protection Impact Assessments and data sharing agreements were completed with both GMP and SWP.

Developments since fieldwork in Greater Manchester Police

Following review of a draft report, GMP provided information on developments undertaken since fieldwork was completed in early 2024. GMP highlighted a range of activity intended to strengthen child-centred policing, decision-making, safeguarding, governance and performance oversight. GMP advised that these developments form part of a broader programme of organisational reform and reflect an ongoing trajectory of improvement.

The research team did not assess these developments directly and therefore cannot comment on their effectiveness or impact. The findings presented in this report are based on evidence gathered during the fieldwork period and should be interpreted in that context. However, by way of update, a summary of further developments reported by GMP since completion of the study is provided at the end of the report.

Chapter 2: Developing the skills for Child First policing

A 16-year-old boy was stopped and searched by two officers in the early hours of a Thursday morning. The search, conducted under section 23 of the Misuse of Drugs Act, was relatively routine: a cannabis grinder with residue was found, but the more significant development came when a PNC check revealed an outstanding marker for taking a motor vehicle without consent. The boy was immediately arrested and handcuffed to the rear, despite being calm and compliant throughout.

The boy explained that the vehicle was his mother's car, that he had driven it to a nearby garage, and that he had already attended the police station and been told he would be contacted for a voluntary interview. He repeatedly asked the officers to call his mother and to check whether voluntary attendance had been arranged. The officers did not do so immediately. One remarked that, regardless of the circumstances, "PNC says you're wanted for taking a motor vehicle without consent" and proceeded on that basis. Only after the boy continued to press the point did a colleague contact the sergeant, who confirmed the case was not ready for arrest and that voluntary attendance should proceed. The boy was de-arrested and uncuffed, with no acknowledgment of what had occurred beyond the instruction to "jump out of the car" and "don't be nicking cars" (BWV-G19).

This case was not unusual. Similar approaches to children were observed or described in other force areas. It illustrates three issues central to this report. First, the failure to listen to and engage with a child in an inclusive and respectful manner, taking account of their rights, their potential and the impact police action can have on their future. Second, the default to force and arrest: the boy was handcuffed and placed in a police vehicle despite no evidence that voluntary attendance was insufficient, no risk of flight and no non-compliance. Third, the inconsistency such encounters reveal. The outcome turned not on the merits of the case but on the boy's own knowledge and persistence. A child who did not know to ask about voluntary attendance, or lacked the confidence to keep pressing, would have had an arrest recorded against them and been taken into custody unnecessarily. Such interactions show clearly that Child First principles have not yet reached the encounters that matter most to children.

A young-in-service and inexperienced frontline

One explanation lies in the composition of the frontline workforce. As outlined above, frontline response policing is now carried out by a high proportion of officers with limited policing experience. Across the two frontline studies, supervisors at sergeant rank estimated that around 60 to 70% of response officers had three years' service or fewer. This reflects the wider national shift in workforce composition following the Police Uplift Programme (Home Office 2023), with officers with five or fewer years' service now accounting for 32% of the total workforce (Home Office 2025 a), and a much higher proportion of response teams. The Police Federation has estimated this proportion to be as high as 80% in some forces (Gloucestershire Police Federation 2023).

Supervisors expressed concerns that many of these newer recruits lacked some of the skills, knowledge and experience to operate effectively in the complex and high-pressure environment of frontline policing. Recruited during the pandemic, many had to be trained online. This is problematic when it comes to the skills required of frontline officers, particularly the softer skills necessary to engage effectively with children. Learning 'on the job' becomes more important in this context. In one GMP neighbourhood team, a sergeant spending time on shift was highly valued: "It's great when our supervisor is out with us on the street. He's got years of experience and people in the community know him so well. We like to see him in action as we learn a lot and it helps us to engage with people better, particularly children" (GMP2.NPC3). However, such on-shift supervision was not reported in any response team. This is unsurprising since every response team observed across both scoping areas was operating below capacity. Building these skills through learning on the job is also

challenged by the relative lack of experience of supervisors themselves. This was a particular issue in response teams where the toll of night shifts meant that more experienced officers often moved on to the more family-friendly shift patterns of neighbourhood or specialist teams.

Lack of child-specific training

A lack of child-specific training compounds this inexperience. Across both scoping studies, no frontline officer reported having received focused training on child-specific issues such as child brain development, adjusting practice to accommodate neurodiversity, communicating effectively with children, child-specific restraint techniques, or disproportionality and bias in decision-making about children. A similar lack of child-specific training for frontline officers was reported in the two other forces involved in the wider study. Where training addressed children at all, officers reported that it tended to focus on the availability of powers and procedural requirements rather than on how to engage with children as children. Officers were familiar, for example, with their powers to search and seize items, including mobile phones, but received little or no guidance on how to explain what they were doing to a child in a way they could understand, or how to manage the distress that such an intrusive process can cause.

In SWP, a small number of frontline officers had received training on ACEs, but typically five or more years earlier, before many current frontline officers had joined the service. Likewise, in GMP, some neighbourhood officers in one area had received recent training on ACEs and trauma awareness. These officers reflected positively on the value of the training: "Understanding ACEs is a major part of our job. It's about what's happening in the child's home life. You find that a lot of children's behaviour is influenced by who they live with" (GMP2.NPC4). On patrol these officers demonstrated strong rapport building and an ability to appreciate the challenges faced by the children they knew. Several described actively supporting children they had previously arrested for drug or knife offences in accessing apprenticeships and employment, recognising that the relationship built through policing could itself become a positive. By contrast, their untrained colleagues were less likely to appreciate vulnerability, particularly when associated with neurodiversity, and more likely to express pejorative and punitive attitudes towards children coming to their attention.

Across both forces, only two frontline PCs had heard of Child First or child-centred policing as specific approaches, and most supervisors had not heard of these terms either. Many officers were familiar with the significance of the voice of the child but this was generally associated with children as victims and witnesses of domestic abuse. This lack of awareness is concerning since the NPCC's National Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy has been in place since 2015. When officers were asked to identify what might characterise a Child First or child-centred approach there was quite a wide variation in responses. Some officers, whilst unfamiliar with child-centred policing as a formal concept, had a good understanding of what such approaches are trying to achieve, particularly those in neighbourhood teams who regularly engaged with specialist policing teams and partner agencies. However, this was not always the case. One neighbourhood PC, for example, commented: "The police use custody as a tool to punish the kids and that's how it should be" (GMP1.NPC1). A lack of appreciation of the importance and effectiveness of diversionary and minimum intervention approaches meant that punitive attitudes persisted amongst some response officers. As one response sergeant stated: "There's nothing in PACE that says we have to treat children differently when making an arrest but custody don't want them ... Sometimes that's what kids need" (SWP1.Sgt2).

In the absence of child-specific training, many frontline officers described relying on their own parenting experience. As one officer explained: "I've got two kids. That's what I work from" (SWP2.PC19). There were some very good examples of response officers engaging with children as children, adjusting their communication style and approach to accommodate their age and capacities. However, those without parenting experience were more likely to express uncertainty or

discomfort. One officer said simply: "I don't like kids. I'm not used to being around them and so I don't know how to deal with them" (GMP1.PC5). This is not a gap that officers can easily fill through life experience alone. Nor is learning from parenting one's own children an adequate substitute for wider child-specific learning and an appreciation of the different life experiences and capacities of the children they are likely to encounter in their work. This lack of training and broader awareness-raising results in unjustifiable inconsistency for children.

There were a small number of frontline officers with externally acquired child-specific skills, gained from working in specialist policing teams or in other occupations such as social work, teaching or the secure estate. They described utilising those skills daily in their interactions with children and partner agencies, and there was some informal skill-sharing within teams, although officers felt that their skills were not sufficiently valued or utilised for the benefit of the wider team.

Recommendations

The following recommendations arise from the research findings across both force areas and are intended to have national application. They are informed by, and should be read alongside, the detailed recommendations in the individual force area reports for GMP and SWP (Kemp and Bevan 2025; 2026b). The evidence points to the need for a more systematic approach to developing frontline officers' understanding of children, while also making better use of the specialist knowledge that already exists within frontline teams and partner agencies.

The expectation that professionals working with children should have an appropriate understanding of child development is supported by international children's rights standards. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019) has stated that professionals involved in the administration of child justice should receive systematic and continuous multidisciplinary training, including on children's social and psychological development, developments in neuroscience, discrimination, group dynamics and diversionary measures. This is directly relevant to frontline officers whose decisions can determine whether and how a child enters the justice system. It does not require officers to become child-development specialists, but it does require them to have sufficient knowledge to communicate effectively with children and to exercise police powers in a developmentally informed and proportionate way.

Recommendation 1: Nationally mandated child-specific training for all frontline officers

All officers and staff in contact with children should receive mandatory child-specific training, regularly refreshed, covering:

- what Child First and child-centred approaches require in practice, and the evidence base for the effectiveness of minimum intervention and diversion in supporting desistance;
- children's experiences of punitive approaches, including the inappropriate use of arrest and detention, and the long-term negative impact on children's prospects of desistance and their attitudes towards the police;
- child brain development, natural developmental immaturity, and the impact of peer presence on behaviour;
- adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed approaches;
- neurodiversity and its behavioural presentations;
- communicating effectively with children;
- child-specific de-escalation and restraint techniques; and
- disproportionality and unconscious bias.

Training should be in-person, co-created and co-delivered by police alongside external experts, including lawyers and children's rights specialists, and should incorporate the voices of children with experience of policing. The requirement to complete child-specific training should be incorporated into the Licence to Practise, proposed in the Home Office (2026a) White Paper, *From local to national: A new model for policing*.

Recommendation 2: Capitalising on existing expertise within frontline teams

Forces should audit the specialist knowledge and skills within frontline teams and identify mechanisms for sharing that expertise, including champion roles, shift-shadowing arrangements and short secondments to specialist units and partner agencies, including YJS, Early Help, children's services and exploitation teams. Supervisors should provide in-person, on-patrol supervision at appropriate intervals for young-in-service officers to model child-centred practice in live interactions.

Chapter 3: Frontline policing interactions with children

This chapter examines children's encounters with frontline police officers. It begins by considering the distinct roles played by neighbourhood and response teams and the different ways in which children come into contact with these officers in practice. While neighbourhood policing often provides opportunities for relationship-building and longer-term engagement with children and communities, response officers are more likely to encounter children during incidents requiring immediate intervention and decision-making.

It then explores one of the most common and consequential forms of police contact experienced by children: stop and search. Drawing primarily on BWV footage, observations and officer interviews, it examines how officers communicate with children, explain police powers and exercise discretion during encounters. Children's own accounts, gathered through the Sphear programme, are integrated throughout the analysis to provide insight into how these encounters are experienced and understood by those subject to them.

Neighbourhood and response teams: contrasting approaches

Observations of frontline officers on patrol, alongside interviews, revealed marked differences in how neighbourhood and response officers engage with children, differences that have significant implications for a consistent Child First approach across all frontline policing. Neighbourhood teams in both areas, with their emphasis on relationship-building and prevention, were observed to have generally positive interactions with children. Whilst there was some variation between neighbourhood teams in both forces, PCSOs and neighbourhood PCs knew their communities, and the children in them, well. They typically interacted in a relaxed and positive fashion and were, in turn, well received. This was particularly evident in SWP, where children approached and spoke to officers who were clearly well known in community spaces such as youth clubs.

Neighbourhood officers described working closely with partner agencies, including the local authority, and specialist policing teams, such as missing and exploitation teams, to divert children from offending behaviour and expressed commitment to, and derived satisfaction from, their problem-solving and prevention work. As one officer explained, "It gives us lots of autonomy and we can get our teeth into things" (GMP2.NPC4). There were inevitably some differences between neighbourhood teams and between individual officers, but overall neighbourhood officers demonstrated the positive, relationship-based engagement that Child First principles envisage, treating children as members of the community rather than primarily as risks to be managed.

The different remit of response teams dictates their interactions to a considerable degree. Predominantly focused on responding to emergency calls, managing tense and potentially risky situations and operating around the clock, their opportunity to build rapport, develop relationships with children and to engage with partner agencies is significantly constrained. There were nonetheless some very good examples of response officers taking the time to engage with children as children. In one call-out to a domestic incident, for example, a PC showed real skill and empathy, tailoring her language, her choice of subject and physical positioning to speak separately with a very young child and an older teenager. She took the time required and listened with care to the child's responses, but was obviously aware of intruding no more on their evening than was appropriate to gauge their safety and welfare (SWP2.PC14). As with several officers who were particularly adept at interacting with children, this PC had received specialist communications training in another role. Likewise, another officer who read children's behaviour particularly well was able to do so as a result of drawing on her experience of her brother's autism, "I can tell by their behaviour how some children are trying to cope when approached by the police but this can be mis-read by other officers"

(SWP1.PC6). The importance of training in enabling Child First approaches to be taken in the pressured environment of response work cannot be overstated.

From the child's perspective, neighbourhood and response officers may be indistinguishable. A negative experience at the hands of a response officer can colour a child's response to a neighbourhood officer, and the reverse is equally true. It was of concern to some neighbourhood officers that they could be called up to cover shifts on response, particularly as this could undermine the hard work they put into engaging with children locally. As one officer put it, "When on response you're working to targets and we have to lock kids up. We then see them on the beat every day and they hate us for what we've done to them" (GMP1.NPC2). For a child, the officer who arrested them last week and the neighbourhood officer who knows their name are, in uniform, the same. The trust built over months can be undone in a single encounter, and once lost it is not easily regained.

Some cultural attitudes also require challenge. As noted above, the belief that arrest and a short period in police custody constitutes an appropriate punitive response to low-level offending was expressed by some officers, unaware of the research evidence that unnecessary and harsh custody experiences can be traumatic and are associated with increased rather than reduced reoffending (McAra and McVie 2010; Bevan 2022). These officers were generally well-intentioned and many genuinely did not want to criminalise children. However, there is a gap in professional knowledge that training needs to address.

Stop and search encounters

For many children, the first significant encounter with the police is a stop and search. It generally takes place on the street, often at night, commonly in groups, and frequently without warning. It is one of the most intrusive powers available to frontline officers and one of the least supervised. In practice, it is also one of the earliest points at which police discretion can bring a child into contact with the youth justice system.

In GMP, out of 385 stop and search incidents where the outcome was known, only 44 searches, 11%, resulted in a positive outcome. Almost a quarter of these involved a small quantity of drugs for which an out-of-court resolution (OOCR) was the most likely outcome. Most searches therefore produced no evidence of an offence. The force has also proactively increased its use of stop and search, carrying out 30,310 searches in the year ending March 2023 (HMICFRS 2024a). This is a significant development: while child arrest rates have fallen nationally, the increased use of stop and search means that children's contact with the police has not reduced to the same degree. SWP, by contrast, has moved in the opposite direction, significantly reducing its use of stop and search from 9,900 searches in the year ending March 2022 to 7,102 in the year ending March 2023, a reduction of 28% (HMICFRS 2024b). Disproportionality remains a concern in both forces and is examined in more detail below.

These figures need to be considered in the context of the wider research literature on stop and search. Studies have consistently identified a range of problematic impacts of stop and search on those subjected to it, alongside evidence of its relative ineffectiveness in controlling crime (Tiratelli and others 2018). Research globally has documented strong negative impacts on mental and physical health (Weisburd and others 2023), with particular concerns raised about the lasting effects of intrusive encounters on children's anxiety and wellbeing (Geller 2017). The negative impact on trust and confidence in the police is extensively documented (Bradford 2017). Bowling and Phillips (2007) argue that the disproportionate use of stop and search against Black people amounts to unlawful racial discrimination, and identify the repeated stopping and searching of young Black men and boys as among the most damaging features of police-community relations. Stop and search has been described as crystallising the competing demands on police in unequal societies: to produce order

and to police with consent, to fight crime and to respect the rights of those at the margins (de Maillard and O'Neill 2024). These tensions are nowhere more acute than when the person being stopped is a child.

Communication with children

BWV footage provides further insight into how these encounters unfold. Across the GMP recordings, most officers were polite and professional. Many used informal language to reduce intimidation, explained in accessible terms what they were doing and why, and attempted to de-escalate tension through calm communication. However, 11 of the 40 incidents revealed poorer interactions. In these encounters, officers treated children in a wholly adult manner, failed to explain the grounds for the search, or responded to questions with threats rather than explanations. For example, in BWV-G18, a boy ran when police arrived to deal with a report that boys had been throwing stones at a window. An officer gave chase and, due to the momentum of the pursuit, collided with the boy, pushed him against a wall, and took him to the ground where he was handcuffed and searched. The search was negative. The boy was visibly shaking and crying. The officer, apparently unable to recognise the distress the encounter had caused, asked: "Why are you so upset? Is it because you're frightened of what your mum will say?" Sobbing, the boy replied: "No. I'm only 13." When it was established that the boy had not been involved in the original incident, the officer told him that he would have been 'locked up' if he had thrown a stone and that what he had experienced was the consequence of running from the police. The officer's failure to recognise the emotional impact of a physically forceful encounter on a frightened 13-year-old, and his framing of that encounter as a justified consequence rather than something requiring acknowledgement, is precisely what child-specific training is designed to address. A Child First approach requires officers to recognise children's particular vulnerability and to respond to their needs accordingly. Neither was evident here.

A somewhat different picture emerged in the Welsh force. There were no formal stop and search or arrest targets, although such activity was still recognised as an indicator of productivity, creating some informal pressure. Observations of patrol activity showed that officers often adopted a friendly and engaging style that helped to defuse tense situations, sometimes avoiding the need for arrest altogether. Of the 40 SWP BWV footage incidents reviewed, most officers approached children in a calm and relatively relaxed manner, checked understanding, and answered questions. Where one officer in a group encounter became officious or confrontational, colleagues often intervened informally through humour or a quieter manner to calm the interaction. For example, in BWV-S3, an officer chasing a 16-year-old boy caught up with him and joked that he did well, given that he was older and the boy had a head start. The boy grinned and said that he had fallen, and they both laughed. The tension dissolved before it had time to escalate. For a 17-year-old in BWV-S39, who was stopped in connection with a stabbing and taunted by bystanders, the officer calmly placed him in a police van to remove him from view and reduce the hostility around the encounter.

However, poor practice in SWP was also observed in a small number of cases. For example, in BWV-S9, a 15-year-old boy was stopped and searched at night under section 23 of the Misuse of Drugs Act. It was apparent that a chase had occurred before the footage began. The boy was on his back on the ground, handcuffed, with officers shining torches on him. Throughout the search, which lasted nearly nine minutes, the officer made no attempt to explain what the search would involve or to put the boy at his ease. When the boy said it was the first time he had been stopped and searched, and that he had simply been sitting down when the police chased after him, the officer did not acknowledge this. The search was negative and no apology was offered. At the end of the encounter, the officer told the boy that because he was 15 his parents would be informed. The boy had not previously been told this and was visibly dismayed. The handcuffs, which the boy complained were hurting him, were kept on until after his details had been taken.

In BWV-S17, a 15-year-old girl and her male friend were found asleep in a van on a garage forecourt after missing their train home. The first officer opened the door and immediately shouted: "What are you fuckers doing?" Both children were handcuffed and searched. The searches were negative. The girl later told the officer he had given her "a fucking heart attack." This was not an officer losing control in a volatile situation. It was an officer encountering two sleeping children and responding with immediate aggression.

Explanation of children's rights

The BWV footage also revealed significant variation in how officers explained to children their rights during stop and search encounters. In GMP, while most officers identified themselves and told children they were entitled to a copy of the search record, this was frequently delivered in a perfunctory way that children struggled to understand. In BWV-G23, for example, when told the legal basis for the search, a boy responded "I don't know what any of that means," and the officer replied "It's just a bit of spiel we have to say." In BWV-G14, an officer prefaced the required information by saying "I've got to tell you some legal stuff" and "It sounds a bit daft but it's legal and required." The focus was on compliance rather than comprehension – ensuring the words had been said rather than securing the child's understanding and enabling them to exercise their rights. The exclusionary impact of such exchanges is antithetical to a Child First approach. In SWP, officers more consistently identified themselves and communicated the basis for the search and the child's rights, though the information was still not always delivered in a child-friendly way. In both forces, the right to make a complaint was rarely mentioned, and children were rarely offered an opportunity to provide feedback.

Children's need for clear explanations

The importance of communication and understanding was also reflected in the Sphear Media engagement. Across interviews, focus groups and questionnaire responses, participants consistently identified clear explanations as one of the most important aspects of police encounters. Several children reported only a partial understanding of their rights and described situations in which they did not understand why police were taking particular actions. As one participant put it, police should "approach us like we are people instead of criminals straight away ... give us more explanation about what they are doing" (SM5.1). These findings reinforce the importance of communication that is focused on understanding rather than procedural compliance alone.

Complaints, feedback and accountability

The Sphear Media engagement also highlighted low levels of confidence in police accountability processes. Of the 45 children and young people who completed the questionnaire, 34 (76%) reported wanting to complain about the way they had been treated by the police but not doing so. Participants cited a range of reasons, including not knowing how to complain, not being given the opportunity to do so, and a belief that complaints would not be taken seriously or lead to meaningful action. As one participant explained: "The police have so much power that I thought complaints wouldn't be heard" (SM4.1). This reflects wider children's rights concerns about whether complaint mechanisms are meaningful, accessible and capable of supporting institutional learning, rather than existing only as formal processes (Dumortier and de Graaf 2026).

These findings suggest that concerns about police accountability extend beyond individual encounters and reflect wider perceptions of policing among children and young people. The absence of any reference to complaints or feedback mechanisms in the BWV footage reviewed, combined with participants' lack of confidence in existing processes, raises questions about how children are expected to challenge police conduct or contribute to organisational learning following negative encounters.

Personal details requests

A notable difference between the two forces concerned the requesting of personal details following a negative search. In GMP, officers routinely asked children for their details even after finding nothing and, in several cases, threatened arrest if the child refused. Such a threat has no legal basis, since there is no obligation to provide personal details following a negative stop and search. Procedural unfairness of this sort has significant implications for police legitimacy and future co-operation (Bradford 2014). In SWP, where children declined or challenged the request, officers accepted this.

In only one case across both forces did an officer apologise at the close of a negative search for having stopped the child at all. In GMP BWV-G31, having found nothing, one officer said: "Right lads, sorry that I've stopped you in your tracks and enjoy the rest of your day." While it cost the officer nothing to apologise, for the children it may have made a considerable difference. A simple apology acknowledges what the child already knows: that nothing was found, that their time was taken and that the encounter was an imposition. It is also, in the context of building trust between police and children, one of the easiest things an officer can do. That it happened only once across the 80 BWV recordings reviewed suggests that acknowledgment and apology are not yet understood as part of what a good stop and search looks like. More broadly, the gap between what officers are required to communicate and what children actually understand remains significant, and guidance and child-specific training are needed to address it.

These findings are consistent with procedural justice research which demonstrates that perceptions of respect, voice, fairness and neutrality are central to public trust and confidence in legal authorities (Tyler 2006; Tyler and Huo 2002). Children and young people's accounts similarly suggested that the quality of the interaction often mattered as much as its outcome. Being listened to, treated respectfully and given meaningful explanations were repeatedly identified as important features of positive encounters. Conversely, encounters perceived as dismissive, disrespectful or unfair appeared capable of undermining confidence in the police, even where no formal criminal justice outcome followed.

Use of force

Across the 80 stop and search incidents reviewed, the use of force, particularly the application of handcuffs and the length of time the children remained restrained, was not always obviously justifiable. For example, in GMP, 35% of children were handcuffed, compared with 52% in SWP, with children searched alone more likely to be handcuffed than those searched in groups. Several children complained of discomfort, and in a number of cases the cuffs remained in place beyond the point at which their continued use appeared lawful, necessary and proportionate, including following negative searches and where children were fully cooperative and compliant. This is inconsistent with the College of Policing's (2023) Authorised Professional Practice (APP): Legal Application, which states that handcuffs must not be used as a matter of routine during stop and search, and must only be used for as long as their use remains lawful, necessary and proportionate. Unnecessary handcuffing can be embarrassing and stigmatising for the child, undermining police legitimacy and opportunities for pro-social engagement (Tyler 2006; Scrase 2021). Children interviewed frequently described police encounters in emotional rather than procedural terms. Feelings of fear, embarrassment, frustration and vulnerability were common themes, suggesting that officers may underestimate the impact that forceful or intrusive encounters can have on children, particularly where little explanation is provided. A greater focus on child-specific de-escalation techniques and individualised consideration of the necessity and proportionality of force is required to minimise the impact of stop and search encounters.

Disproportionality

Alongside the nature of individual encounters sit broader issues of disproportionality. Key to identifying and addressing issues of disproportionality is the accurate collection of ethnicity data. However, the BWV footage review reveals several concerns in this regard. First, the requirement to ask children for their self-defined ethnicity was almost entirely overlooked in both forces. In GMP only 2 officers asked for this information. One officer's dismissive attitude, "I need to ask you your ethnicity. It's crazy isn't it?", may help explain why the requirement was so frequently ignored. In SWP, children were asked to self-define their ethnicity in only 5 of the 40 cases reviewed.

Second, where a child gives a nationality rather than an ethnic category in response to a self-definition question, the officer should ask a follow-up question to establish the child's ethnicity rather than accepting nationality as a sufficient answer. Without that clarifying question, the self-defined ethnicity record may not accurately reflect the child's ethnic background. In one SWP case, a Black child described himself as Portuguese. Without the officer also recording perceived ethnicity, the child's experience of that stop and search would have been invisible in the data used to monitor racial disproportionality. This points to a wider limitation: while a broader range of categories is available under self-defined ethnicity, the officer-defined codes are far more limited. These codes are now dated, having been developed in the 1970s on the basis of visual appearance, and they include no category for mixed ethnicity. We recommend updating them to align with ONS Census categories, including Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups.

The experience of Black children in stop and search encounters can involve compounding indignities that go beyond the search itself. One GMP case illustrates how these dynamics can play out (BWV-G2). A 14-year-old Black boy was subjected to a drugs search during which an officer stood on his coat. When the boy asked the officer to move, he was ignored, accused of being rude and disrespectful, and threatened with handcuffs. The search proved negative, but the officers asked the boy to provide his details for a PNC check. Knowing his rights, he refused. The officer told him, "We can do this the easy way or the hard way", with the hard way being to "leave you in a cell until you've given us these details." When the officer threatened arrest, the boy relented. No drugs were found and no apology was offered. Whether the officer would have responded differently to a White child in the same circumstances cannot, of course, be established from the video footage. What the encounter does illustrate is how the cumulative effect of a negative search, the dismissal of a reasonable request, the threat of custody for exercising a legal right, and the absence of any acknowledgment at the end of the search, can leave a Black child with good reason to distrust the police. That distrust, repeated across communities and generations, reduces the likelihood of cooperation, disclosure and positive engagement with the police, and is itself a reinforcing factor in the cycle of disproportionality that forces acknowledge but struggle to address (Tyler 2006; Scrase 2021).

Similar concerns were raised by children and young people interviewed by Sphear Media, particularly Black and mixed heritage participants, several of whom described feeling routinely stereotyped because of their appearance, clothing, hairstyle, neighbourhood or ethnicity. One young person explained that officers would see 'a tracksuit' and assume criminality, adding: "I think they respect White people but not Black or Brown people." Reflecting on his experiences more broadly, he argued that police should approach young people "with a blank slate rather than just judging them and stereotyping them from the get go" (SM1.3). Another participant similarly observed: "It's different walking around with a group of White people – they don't get stopped" (SM3.1). These accounts reinforce the importance of understanding disproportionality not simply as a matter of statistical over-representation but also in terms of how children experience police encounters and interpret the reasons for police attention (Bowling and Phillips 2007; Bradford 2017).

Disproportionality is not only a matter of race. Indiscriminate searching based largely on the location of the child in a so-called hot spot means that children living in high-crime, often high-deprivation, areas are also subjected to over-policing in comparison to their more advantaged peers, and risk being unnecessarily criminalised. Such searches are likely to have a significantly negative impact on trust and confidence in the police (McAra and McVie 2005; Scrase 2021). In BWV-G9, two boys aged 14 and 15 years were stopped on the street at 10 pm because, the officer said, they had been acting suspiciously and were in an area where drug dealing was prevalent. No drugs were found. Similarly, in BWV-G37, a 16-year-old girl was stopped while sitting alone on a bench in her local park at 7 pm. The officer's stated grounds were that the area was known for drugs and that she was sitting there on her own. After the search proved negative, the girl pointed across to the house where she lived. Children in areas of high deprivation are more visible to officers and more available to be stopped than their more advantaged peers. They pay a disproportionate price for living where they live.

These more indiscriminate stops were often associated with reliance on the smell of cannabis as the sole ground for a search, particularly in areas of high deprivation. In one SWP case, five teenagers were stopped and searched with a negative result in a woodland area after officers relied on the smell of cannabis as the basis for the search. One officer initially suggested that he could smell cannabis from 'miles away' while travelling to the scene, before correcting himself and narrowing the basis for the search once on foot (BWV-S38). It was not always apparent that decisions to search in these situations were sufficiently informed by guidance on the care required in considering grounds and proportionality, particularly the College of Policing's APP on Stop and Search, including its section on the smell of cannabis as the sole ground for a search under s23 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (College of Policing 2017).

Consistency

Officers have wide discretion when deciding how to deal with cases following a positive stop and search, and different approaches were observed in similar circumstances. In one force, four of the BWV cases reviewed involved children of good character who were found with a small amount of cannabis. Although the drug was removed and destroyed in each case, the children were dealt with differently: i) no further action was taken; ii) a cannabis warning was issued; iii) an Outcome 22 disposal with an intervention was imposed; and iv) the child was arrested, then de-arrested, interviewed voluntarily and given a community resolution. Officers require clearer local guidance to support a fair and consistent approach to like cases.

Scrutiny

Both forces have put in place meaningful accountability mechanisms around stop and search that are worth noting. GMP, for example, has 11 external scrutiny panels operating across all policing districts, with panel members trained in stop and search and use of force powers, reviewing BWV footage and providing feedback directly to officers and to force governance meetings. These panels include academics, youth workers, charities working with young people, and representatives from Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) children's services. GMP has also established dedicated youth-led panels in some districts specifically designed to review incidents involving young people and gather their perspectives, and a further independent panel established by the GMCA to scrutinise arrest and detention (HMICFRS 2024a). In SWP, officers electronically record stop and searches using the iPatrol app, sergeants must review the reasonableness of each search record, and inspectors scrutinise every search of someone from an ethnic minority background. The force has also introduced refreshed stop and search training using video footage of encounters to encourage debate, with community members invited to observe the sessions (HMICFRS 2024 b). These are important developments and reflect a commitment to accountability, participation and community engagement.

However, the evidence of the BWV footage review indicates that, in both forces, there is still significant progress to be made in achieving consistently Child First stop and search encounters. The limited child-specific guidance in PACE Code A and at force level on the adjustments expected when searching children means that supervising officers and scrutiny panels lack a consistent set of expectations against which to assess the encounters they are reviewing. The College of Policing's consultation on revised Stop and Search APP, which closed on 6 July 2026, is therefore welcome, particularly its proposed stronger focus on children, disproportionality, safeguarding and the quality of the encounter (College of Policing 2026a).

Recommendations

Child-specific training and guidance on how to engage with children during stop and search encounters remain a significant gap. While the recently closed College of Policing consultation is a welcome step in this direction (College of Policing 2026a), national child-specific guidance and training are still required. This should cover not only the legal requirements, but also how officers communicate them in a way children can understand and act upon.

Recommendation 3: National child-specific guidance and training on stop and search

The College of Policing, working with the NPCC and Home Office, should develop national child-specific guidance and training on the stop and search of children. All forces should be required to implement this guidance through officer training, supervision and local stop and search policy. The guidance should address:

- the particular importance of proportionality when deciding to stop and search a child, recognising that stop and search can be traumatic and, where inappropriately used, can have a lasting impact on a child's confidence in the police;
- the particular care required when relying on the smell of cannabis as a ground for searching a child, including the principle that reliance on a single ground is not good practice;
- child-appropriate communication of what is happening, the grounds for the search and the child's rights, including the right to a copy of the search record, the right to decline to give personal details following a negative search, and the right to complain;
- individualised risk assessment before applying handcuffs and prompt removal once any risk has resolved;
- compliance with the same-sex search requirement under PACE Code A 3.6 for more thorough searches; and
- the requirement to collect self-defined ethnicity data and techniques for explaining the basis for the question and making the enquiry in an effective and age-appropriate way.

Recommendation 4: Stop and search scrutiny panels involving children

Every force should establish stop and search scrutiny panels that include children and young people with experience of being stopped and searched, drawing on the models developed in GMP and SWP. Panel findings should feed directly into officer training and force governance. Youth-led panels, as piloted in GMP, should be encouraged as a means of giving children a direct voice in shaping how officers interact with them.

Recommendation 5: Performance indicators for stop and search of children

Forces should be required to report publicly on the positive outcome rate for stop and search encounters involving children, disaggregated by ethnicity, alongside the ratio of searches to arrests. Self-defined ethnicity recording should be treated as a non-negotiable procedural requirement, monitored through supervisory review of BWV footage. Broader child-specific performance

indicators, covering arrest decision-making and diversionary outcomes, are addressed in recommendation 15.

Recommendation 6: Updating officer-defined ethnicity codes

The Home Office should update officer-defined ethnicity codes to align with ONS census categories, which include Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh; Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African; Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups; White; and Other ethnic group. The current officer-defined codes, based on visual appearance and allocated in the 1970s, are dated and do not include a category for mixed ethnicity, making it impossible for officers to record this accurately. All officers should receive training on how to ask children for their self-defined ethnicity in an accessible and age-appropriate way, and on the requirement to ask clarifying follow-up questions where a child gives a response which does not correspond to one of the available categories (for example, where they describe their nationality), so that it can be recorded as accurately as possible.

Chapter 4: Unmet welfare needs driving police contact

While much of this report focuses on children who come to police attention as suspected offenders, frontline officers across all four force areas reported that much of their engagement with children arose not from suspected offending at all, but from welfare and safeguarding concerns for which the police are neither primarily responsible nor adequately equipped. Understanding this is essential to explaining why arrest is so often the default: for many children, it is not investigative necessity, but the absence of an effective welfare response, that brings them into contact with the youth justice system.

In one force, an inspector described night-time demand relating to children as being dominated by non-crime-related calls, many of which involved matters that social workers, health or mental health teams would more appropriately handle. For some response officers, missing children alone accounted for the majority of their workload, with looked after children representing the largest share of those calls. Officers described routinely managing situations that are fundamentally children's services matters. When asked about the frequency with which police were required to respond to matters more appropriately dealt with by other services, one officer commented: "100% – we're a jack of all trades and a master of none" (SWP1.PC5). These welfare-focused encounters consume substantial police resources, and early police contact can draw vulnerable children, particularly those in care, into formal criminal processes (Prison Reform Trust 2016). There are several recurring patterns to this welfare demand.

Recurring patterns of welfare demand

Friday afternoon handover

There were frequent complaints in both scoping areas of non-criminal welfare concerns being transferred to response teams at the end of the day, particularly on a Friday afternoon: "Social workers ring at 4.55 pm on a Friday and hand everything over to us for the weekend. They know we'll deal with it" (GMP1.PC11). Response teams were generally careful not to criticise partner agencies, which they recognised were themselves struggling with resource pressures. However, they noted that the concern had often been known to the local authority earlier in the week but had not been progressed effectively. Several officers in GMP suggested that the Right Care, Right Person (RCRP) initiative had begun to reduce this practice. RCRP is intended to ensure that people with health or social care needs are responded to by the person or service with the right skills, training and experience, rather than defaulting to the police. A recent evaluation found broad support for the principles of RCRP, but also identified implementation challenges, including health and social care capacity, inter-agency communication and clarity of roles (Home Office and Department of Health and Social Care 2024). In this context, these findings underline the need for the application of RCRP to children to include an explicit child-focused framework, ensuring that children's services meet their statutory duties and that children do not simply fall between services.

The Government's White Paper signals a welcome recognition of this structural problem, acknowledging that children too often fall through the cracks between services and committing to a refreshed national protocol to tackle the over-criminalisation of children in care (Ministry of Justice 2026).

Enforcing curfews for children in local authority care

In areas with high numbers of placements for looked after children, police have become the default response to minor curfew breaches. Officers described their frustration at responding to high-risk missing-person reports concerning children who were simply staying out with friends:

It's wrong that the home can simply call the police, particularly when no offence has been committed and there's a 16- or 17-year-old who is 20 or 30 minutes over their curfew. Most of the time they're at a friend's house, with their parents, or out in town and they'll come back a bit later on. Nothing needs to happen, but it comes through to the police as a high risk 'misper' [missing person] and we have to take action (SWP1.PC12).

A call handler in GMP described challenging placement workers: "We would say 'What efforts have you made?' They say 'I'm only a staff member'... All the time they say 'it's our policy'." Registered care homes are required to maintain qualified staffing, but the semi-independent and temporary accommodation increasingly used to house older children, including houses in multiple occupation, commonly relies on temporary, often low-paid and unqualified staff to cover shifts. In some settings, only one member of staff may be on duty overnight, meaning they cannot leave the accommodation to collect or look for a child without leaving others unsupervised. Staff with no prior knowledge of the children in their care may also lack both the information and the authority to respond effectively. Although this is the responsibility of the placement and children's services, the task ultimately defaults to the police.

Some officers described offering lifts home to children seen out late who they knew would otherwise miss their curfew and be reported missing, leaving officers feeling that they had become a "glorified taxi service" (SWP2.PC7). Some excellent Child First practice was observed in this context, including officers using a child's mobile phone to make contact in an accessible way, maintaining appropriate boundaries, avoiding unnecessary police intervention and exploring changes to the arrangements to prevent the issue recurring. However, PCs commonly reported that their uniformed presence could antagonise children, with some officers feeling that they became viewed as the "bad guys" as a result (SWP1.Sgt1), and their involvement could escalate situations rather than resolve them.

As with the Friday handover, policing teams do their best to work with placements to manage these issues, rather than escalating them to regulators such as Ofsted or, in Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). In one borough in Greater Manchester, for example, the Prevention Hub has worked with local care home managers to agree a pledge in relation to missing children, which commits the home to a checklist of seven activities that they will complete before calling GMP. However, a clearer national framework is required to reduce unnecessary police contact for these most vulnerable children.

Placement disturbances

Officers across all force areas raised concerns about being called to local authority placements for incidents that would not warrant police involvement in a family home and which could lead to the child being taken into custody. For example, during observations in SWP, officers were called to an argument outside a children's home involving a boy behaving hyperactively. While they managed to quieten him down, an officer said that the boy had only just moved to the home and, the previous night, he had been arrested for damaging his room: "He needs to be seen by mental health services but there's no route through which we can get help for him tonight" (SWP1.PC9). That same night, the boy was arrested and taken into police custody, again for criminal damage.

Similar instances were encountered in other force areas studied. In one such case, a 17-year-old looked after Black girl was arrested for criminal damage after throwing a bowl of noodles and a cup of tea at the wall of her care home during an argument about staff reporting her behaviour to her parents. She was brought into custody in handcuffs that she said hurt and left visible marks on her wrists. The custody officer initially refused detention, as this was a minor incident, but changed his mind after the arresting officer exaggerated the extent of the damage, saying she had 'smashed up' a room. When asked whether a voluntary interview might be appropriate, the arresting officer said it was not, on the grounds that the girl often went missing and had nowhere to go because the home

had asked her to leave. With no alternative accommodation available, detention was authorised. For this child, custody was not an investigative necessity. It was the only available response to a welfare failure that no other agency was in a position to address.

These are not exceptional cases. They are representative of a population of children whose vulnerabilities lead to police intervention and to custody becoming a recurring feature of childhood. The position of looked after children is of particular concern in this study. Fewer than 0.7% of children in England are looked after (Department for Education 2025), yet they are significantly over-represented in police custody. Northumbria Police went further than the other forces in this study by manually reviewing individual detention logs to capture information not available in standard electronic downloads, creating a richer dataset. Among the seven forces that provided electronic custody record data for the national analysis, this was the only force to include looked after status. The data provide a rare insight into the over-representation of looked after children in custody: 17% of detained children were flagged as looked after. These children were significantly more likely to have a prior offence recorded: 81%, compared with 55% of children who were not looked after.³ This pattern indicates repeated contact with the justice system. A hand-sift of 199 individual detention logs across two MPS pilot suites revealed similar levels of over-representation, with 22% of detained children currently looked after, and a further 25% otherwise open to child welfare services (Bevan and Kemp 2026b). The overlap between these two populations is not incidental. It reflects a structural reality in which looked after children are systematically over-exposed to both systems.

Children reported missing

There is considerable overlap between children reported missing and the looked after children whose placement disturbances are discussed above. One response officer estimated that missing children alone accounted for around 70–80% of their workload, with looked after children representing the majority of those calls (SWP2.PC5). While the police have a role in locating missing children, the requirement for a prevention interview following a child's return, sometimes still referred to as a safe and well check, resulted in further police contact in almost every case in the two scoping forces. Not only is this a substantial drain on police resources, but it also means that a child who is reported missing regularly may have repeated contact with the police, often late at night, which can be a traumatising and unnecessary intrusion into their lives. Response officers commonly noted, and researchers observed, that children were rarely willing to engage with police officers, particularly those in uniform, and officers felt that this intrusion was not always in the child's interests.

While such checks serve important safeguarding purposes, it is not necessary in every instance for all post-return engagement to be police-led. Local partnership policies and procedures, together with individual management plans, should be reviewed to identify when welfare-focused follow-up, including return interviews, can be undertaken by non-police professionals, carers or third-sector partners, with relevant information shared back into police systems.⁴ SWP's model offers a practical example of how this can work: National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) workers embedded within missing and exploitation teams conduct return home interviews in some cases, providing a genuinely independent and welfare-focused alternative to police-led checks that children are more willing to engage with.

These issues are intensified by the increasing use of private children's homes and out-of-authority placements. Children may be placed at some distance from their home authority, family networks

³ The difference in rates of prior offending between looked after and non-looked-after children was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 65.11$, $p < .001$), meaning that the difference is highly unlikely to be due to chance.

⁴ See National Police Chiefs' Council (2022a) Children who go missing from care framework and the College of Policing (2026b) APP on Missing Persons.

and existing professional relationships. Where such children go missing or where concerns arise about exploitation, responsibility can become fragmented between the placing authority, the host authority, the placement provider and the police. In practice, the host authority and local police are often the first responders, while the placing authority retains statutory responsibility. This can introduce delay and drift in decision-making and increase the likelihood that police become the default response to welfare concerns that require a coordinated children's services response.

Urgent need for support from welfare agencies

In the majority of their engagements with children, response officers are thus fulfilling a welfare or safeguarding function for which they are not primarily responsible and for which they do not have the training, the relationships or the statutory framework to fulfil effectively. Children's services and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) have shrunk back under austerity and the police are often the only service available out of hours. Unlike the close working relations neighbourhood teams reported with their partner agencies, response teams in all force areas felt under-supported by other services, whilst acknowledging their individual resourcing pressures. Emergency duty teams (EDT), the out-of-hours social care resource, were consistently described across all four force areas as unable to respond effectively to requests for information or support when a child came to police attention. Often only one social worker was on duty, managing calls from the public alongside those from the police. A response sergeant in SWP was direct: "They'll be involved but they're not providing any help. They're also highly unlikely to share information at this time either. What we get from social services is next to nothing" (SWP2.Sgt1).

In the absence of welfare support, the police are placed in an impossible position and have limited options. Under section 46 of the Children Act 1989, the police can remove a child to suitable accommodation, or prevent their removal from a place, for up to 72 hours where they have reasonable cause to believe that the child would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm. However, the power is rarely used. Custody officers in the MPS were candid about why:

If you take a child into police protection, the local authority won't come and get them until the last minute. So the child is in a police station, without food and drink,⁵ without 30-minute checks, without me talking to them ... So personally, while I know the research, custody can be a safer place than police protection – and certainly safer than letting them out (MPS.CS7.BRI).

The result is that children are often arrested not because detention is necessary for the investigation, but because frontline officers have no effective welfare response available and custody may become the only means of keeping the child safe. Some of the children interviewed by Sphear Media described police custody in terms that suggest they experienced it as an adverse childhood experience in itself, reinforcing Bevan's account of custody as harmful, punitive and exclusionary (Bevan 2022, 2024). As one PC put it: "Only rarely do they [children] need to go down the crime side but they've crossed over and the support has stopped. We're probably doing more harm than good" (SWP1.PC7).

Running through all of these examples is a single structural problem: when a child cannot safely go home, there is frequently nowhere for them to go. The absence of alternative accommodation options is not a peripheral concern. It is one of the most significant drivers of unnecessary child detention across the forces studied. It affects children whose home circumstances make release from police custody inappropriate, but whose offending does not warrant detention at all. It affects children in crisis whose needs are welfare needs, not criminal justice needs, but who end up in a cell

⁵ The officer is referring to the structured welfare checks and routine offers of refreshment that form part of custody procedure under PACE, rather than suggesting that children under police protection are denied food and drink.

because no other safe space is available. For these most vulnerable children, arrest is not only the path of least resistance; it is the only path available.

Resolving this requires more than police guidance. It requires a cross-agency response, led by Government, that establishes clear responsibilities for children's services at the point of police contact, ensures that out-of-hours support is genuinely available, and identifies alternative accommodation options that can be accessed by frontline officers in real time.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to address the structural gap identified above: the absence of timely, child-specific, multi-agency support when children come to police attention. They are directed not only at police forces, but also at Government, local authorities, health services and inspectorates, because the use of custody as a default place of safety cannot be resolved by policing alone.

Recommendation 7: A child-specific protocol for working with partner agencies

Every force should develop, in partnership with local authorities, health services and YJS, a child-specific protocol drawing on the Right Care, Right Person framework. The protocol should establish which agency holds primary responsibility for particular welfare-related calls involving children, provide mechanisms for information-sharing and access to mental health and social care support when a child comes to police attention, and identify alternative accommodation options to ensure that custody is never used as a default place of safety. Government should require all forces to have such a protocol in place, with HMICFRS inspection of compliance.

Recommendation 8: A national framework to reduce unnecessary police contact for looked after children

Government should work with local authorities, Ofsted, Care Inspectorate Wales and police forces to develop a clearer national framework governing the responsibilities of residential placements before calling the police in relation to children in their care. The framework should establish minimum steps that placements must take before contacting the police about welfare-related incidents, drawing on approaches such as that developed between GMP and local care home managers in one Greater Manchester borough. Police attendance at residential placements for incidents that would not warrant police involvement in a family home should be actively discouraged, with local protocols identifying appropriate alternatives.

Recommendation 9: Out-of-hours support from children's services and mental health services

Government should address the structural gap in out-of-hours children's services and mental health provision that is currently leaving frontline officers as the only available response for vulnerable children outside office hours. Emergency duty teams should be properly resourced to provide real-time information, alternative accommodation where required, and support to frontline officers at the point when a child comes to attention. Without this, the structural pressure to use custody as a place of safety will persist regardless of what Child First guidance requires.

Chapter 5: Decision-making and alternatives to arrest

A case study (CS) from the MPS Child First custody study, which included interviews with children in police custody, illustrates how arrest decision-making can fail children in practice. CS13 was a 14-year-old alleged to have been involved in a robbery arising from a scuffle outside school, during which a phone went missing and may have been kicked into a bush. He was arrested two weeks after the incident, handcuffed at home and brought into police custody to be interviewed. One of his co-accused had been dealt with by voluntary attendance. His mother, a psychotherapist acting as his appropriate adult (AA), offered to bring him to the station for interview at a pre-arranged time while the officers were still in the house, but her offer was declined. She was upset: "One of his friends got that privilege but we didn't" (CS13:AA).

CS13's case is not exceptional. Indeed, a very similar case was considered by the High Court in *ST v Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire Police*,⁶ attracting significant judicial criticism. Rather, it reflects a recurring pattern in which children are arrested and detained even when the evidential basis is weak and no further action ultimately follows. Custody record analysis in both this study and the earlier Nuffield Foundation-funded study (Kemp and others 2023; Kent and others 2026), suggests that children are frequently arrested when this may not have been necessary or proportionate. In the current study, 20.7% of child detainees were initially released with no further action, rising to 60.7% once sufficient time had elapsed for cases to be resolved. An NFA outcome does not, by itself, establish that the original arrest was unlawful or unnecessary: evidence may change, witnesses may withdraw or a reasonable suspicion may ultimately prove unfounded. However, the scale of NFA outcomes, considered alongside the qualitative evidence of underused alternatives, warrants closer scrutiny of arrest necessity and proportionality.

Shortcomings in the legal framework

Children have the right to be detained only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period (Article 37(b) UNCRC). International children's rights instruments consistently emphasise this right and the importance of diversionary, preventive and child-friendly responses to offending by children, including the Beijing Rules, the Riyadh Guidelines and the Guidelines on Child-Friendly Justice (UN General Assembly 1985; UN General Assembly 1990; Council of Europe 2010). These rights are enshrined in Welsh law in the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 and reflected in the Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales (Welsh Government and Ministry of Justice 2019). The High Court has acknowledged the applicability of these principles to decisions to arrest and detain children,⁷ and they are broadly referenced in the NPCC's *Children and Young Persons Policing Charter* (2025a).

However, primary legislation and statutory and operational guidance do not adequately set out the distinct duties that arise when considering the arrest of a child. PACE and the statutory guidance on arrest, Code G, make no reference to the need to approach the arrest and detention of children differently. The only child-specific provision in Code G is a prohibition on arrest at the child's place of education unless it is 'unavoidable' (Note 1B). The College of Policing's (2013) operational guidance (APP on Detention and Custody) does refer to children's rights under the UNCRC and the importance of taking account of age when deciding whether and when to arrest. However, this information is buried in the 'Detainee Care' section of the guidance and, as a sergeant earlier remarked, "There's nothing in PACE that says we have to treat children differently when making an arrest" (SWP1.Sgt2). Until legislation and statutory and College of Policing guidance are amended to require distinct

⁶ [2022] EWHC 1280 (QB).

⁷ In *ST v Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire Police*.

consideration of children at the point of arrest, progress towards Child First approaches will remain limited and inconsistent.

Why alternatives to arrest are not always used

When a child comes to the attention of the police as a suspected offender, the arrest decision is the moment that sets everything else in motion. It determines whether a child is brought into custody, interviewed and held for hours in a cell, or whether the investigation proceeds by voluntary attendance. Decisions at this point often shape whether a child enters the formal criminal justice system at all, and whether a first encounter becomes the start of a pattern rather than remaining a single event. The decision to arrest can itself have long-lasting implications for a child and their future opportunities.

Lawful arrest requires necessity (PACE s24(4)), and statutory guidance emphasises the need to “consider if the necessary objectives can be met by other, less intrusive means” (PACE Code G 1.3). This section considers the factors that lead officers to arrest in circumstances where arrest may not have been strictly necessary and a less intrusive approach may have been more appropriate.

The challenges of voluntary attendance

Voluntary attendance (PACE s29) is the principal alternative to arrest and detention available to frontline officers dealing with children. It enables a child to be interviewed under caution, without arresting them or taking them into custody. However, its use nationally is inconsistent. Data obtained through a Freedom of Information request from 27 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales revealed that three forces reported voluntary interviews representing more than 50% of their total volume of child interviews, while another three reported figures below 10% (Bath 2023). In that analysis, GMP reported the lowest ratio of voluntary attendances to interviews in custody for children: 245 voluntary attendances compared with 4,454 arrests in a single year. A ratio of one voluntary attendance for every 18 arrests is unlikely to reflect the nature of offending alone and suggests a culture in which arrest had become the default and alternatives were rarely considered.

Across the two scoping forces, voluntary interview was significantly underused. The reasons for this are structural rather than individual. First, frontline officers in both areas often lacked confidence in taking the voluntary attendance route. There is now detailed guidance available to forces on voluntary interviews (National Police Chiefs’ Council 2024b), which runs to more than 50 pages. The College of Policing’s (2022a) APP on Investigative Interviewing also includes some operational guidance on conducting voluntary interviews. However, officers lacked guidance on how to decide whether to use voluntary attendance, particularly the types of allegations and circumstances for which it would be appropriate, and were often uncertain about the local arrangements required. Guidance that was available was rarely consulted and poorly understood.

Second, choosing voluntary attendance can be more complex than making an arrest, generally requiring more substantial knowledge about the child and their circumstances than officers may believe is needed when deciding to arrest. As discussed below, sources of information accessible to frontline officers, beyond police databases, are limited. Where an officer is young in service, it requires considerable confidence, in the absence of clear guidance and reliable information, to choose voluntary attendance rather than arrest.

Third, voluntary attendance was widely understood by officers to be more difficult to arrange than an arrest. It requires coordination outside the structure that custody provides automatically. In GMP, the response or neighbourhood officer is responsible for risk assessing the child, offering and securing legal advice, arranging an AA and finding a time convenient to the child, their AA and their lawyer that also fits within the officer’s shift pattern. For a young and inexperienced officer on a busy response shift, with no training in arranging a voluntary interview, arrest removes the complexity and

custody does the rest. One response officer was direct: "It's easier to arrest than it is to VA" (GMP1.PC9). This is not laziness; it is the rational response of an untrained officer to an environment that offers no support for the more demanding alternative.

The contrast with SWP is instructive. Voluntary attendances (VAs) are increasingly organised through a centralised diary system, with a designated VA sergeant responsible for risk assessing the child, ensuring that the child and their AA understand their legal rights, and arranging legal advice through the Defence Solicitor Call Centre (DSCC) if requested. A full record of the voluntary attendance is created in a format similar to a custody record, and a risk assessment is completed before the child leaves. Where the voluntary attendance takes place at a smaller station, the same process can be completed by telephone with the VA sergeant. This means that the interviewing officer does not carry sole responsibility for delivering rights information or conducting risk assessments, and that a proper record of the voluntary attendance is kept.

Even within this well-developed system, voluntary attendance is not yet used as often as it could be. According to data provided to the Home Office, SWP conducted 324 voluntary interviews involving children, compared with 1,171 child detentions in the year ending March 2025, meaning that voluntary interviews accounted for just under 22% of the combined total (Home Office 2026b).⁸ The availability of dedicated VA sergeants is limited, and SWP has recognised the need to train response sergeants to perform this role, extending the reach of the process across the force. The availability of a good process does not on its own change the culture that defaults to arrest. It is nonetheless a model that demonstrates what a well-structured voluntary attendance process can look like and points towards what should be achievable nationally.

The approach taken in SWP also offers a solution to another challenge in driving greater use of voluntary interviews, namely the lack of robust data to enable monitoring of progress. In the latest developmental statistics on voluntary interviews published by the Home Office, 13 forces were unable to provide data on the number conducted, including major metropolitan forces such as the MPS and GMP (Home Office 2026b). The use of a custody-record equivalent in SWP makes data collection more reliable. A similar approach has been taken in Northern Ireland, where police are required to complete a voluntary attendance form, enabling central collection and reporting of VA data (Bath 2023). The absence of a standardised recording mechanism across England and Wales means that progress towards robust and consistent national data remains slow and the statistics remain 'in development'.

Contemporaneous and app-based interviewing

In some forces, a greater willingness by custody officers to refuse detention for children, and challenges organising voluntary attendance, have led to greater use of informal alternatives. These include 'contemporaneous interviews' recorded at the scene using pocket notebooks or BWV footage, and more recently the use of mobile apps to guide interviews and refer cases directly to the youth justice service. As one officer explained: "We can now do OOCs on our phone if they're eligible, it goes through automatically to the YJS" (SWP1.PC4).

These approaches offer real advantages. They allow cases to progress quickly, avoid unnecessary detention, and can result in a proportionate disposal close to the time of the offence. The app reminds officers that an AA must be present when a child is interviewed, and encourages them to take children home so that a parent can fulfil that role. Where an informal resolution is genuinely in the child's interests and no criminal record results, this flexibility can be valuable.

⁸ See Voluntary Attendance to Interview year ending March 2025: table VA_08 and Policy Custody Data Tables, year ending 31 March 2025: table D_04.

App-based guidance of this kind has the potential to support officers in dealing with children informally at the scene in a much wider range of situations. An officer encountering a child for a first low-level offence could be guided to take the child home, speak to their parents, ask the child what is going on, and consider whether informal help and support might be more appropriate than any formal process. In some cases, the right response might be no more than an acknowledgement of what happened and a conversation about why it should not happen again. In others, a referral to Early Help or a simple apology to a victim may be sufficient. Where this takes place, Outcome 22⁹ offers the most appropriate recording mechanism, enabling the case to be closed without imposing any criminal sanction. Even an informal community resolution, as considered further below, carries consequences that may be disproportionate for a first low-level offence. The principle is minimum intervention, and app-based tools could help officers to apply it consistently and confidently at the point of encounter.

However, the same informality that makes these approaches efficient also makes them risky. In one force, officers had begun conducting contemporaneous interviews in informal locations, a practice that appeared to be emerging during the later stages of the fieldwork. Three cases from the BWV footage review, all involving 16-year-old boys, illustrated how app-based interviewing can undermine procedural safeguards in practice. In BWV-S20, a boy found with a small amount of cannabis was questioned on the street using the app. The officer initially did not realise that an AA was required. When prompted by the app, he arranged for the boy's aunt to attend, but then summarised what had already been agreed, including the boy's admission of the offence and agreement to an OOCR and a drug-awareness course. At no point was the possibility of legal advice mentioned. BWV-S40 involved a boy found with cannabis waiting at the roadside for his mother to act as AA. There was no reference to legal advice before the footage ended, and it appeared that the interview proceeded without a lawyer. In BWV-S7, a boy requested legal advice but was told this would delay the interview. One officer suggested arranging a voluntary attendance interview for another day; another proposed taking the boy home for interview with his mother acting as AA, without arranging a lawyer. This last case illustrates a fundamental weakness in contemporaneous interviewing of this kind. In practice, it is unlikely that a lawyer could attend at short notice for a roadside interview or an interview conducted in a child's home. Informing the child of their legal rights is meaningless if there is no mechanism for honouring them.

Legal advice is a critical safeguard for children, helping them to understand their rights and the implications of accepting an OOCR. Yet across these cases, operational convenience took precedence over legal protection. One officer, when corrected on the point that legal advice is free for children in voluntary interviews, replied: "This is the first I knew of it" (SWP1.PC1).

The practice of conducting voluntary interviews informally, outside a police station and without the procedural safeguards that custody provides, is not new. Research has identified similar concerns about street-based voluntary interviews conducted on BWV footage, where the informality of the setting and the absence of custody procedures can undermine suspects' ability to exercise their rights effectively (Ng and Skinns 2021). App-based interviewing represents a further step in this direction, extending the same informality into a guided digital process that can feel more structured than it is.

App-based interviewing is likely to spread as forces look for ways to manage growing caseloads and reduce unnecessary detention. The issues identified here are therefore not specific to one area. The risk is that a tool designed to support diversion becomes, in practice, a mechanism for bypassing the legal protections that make diversion legitimate. Clear national guidance is needed on the use of

⁹ Outcome 22 is the Home Office outcome code used where diversionary, educational or intervention activity has been undertaken and it is not in the public interest to take further criminal justice action.

contemporaneous and app-based interviewing with children, emphasising the mandatory requirement to offer legal advice before any interview proceeds, regardless of setting, and requiring forces to have a process in place to enable that right should the child seek to exercise it.

SWP has recognised these risks and has introduced measures to address them. Contemporaneous interviews are now required to be conducted through the force's centralised VA system, as described above, ensuring that a record of the interview is made, a risk assessment is completed, the child and their AA understand their legal rights, and legal advice is available if requested. This approach ensures that the informality of the setting does not come at the cost of the child's legal protections, and provides a model that other forces could adopt.

Street bail: a key but under-used power

Street bail, the power under section 30A of PACE to release a child before bringing them into custody with a requirement to attend the station at a later time, was barely used at all across the forces studied. This is a key power for children. Arrest confers investigative powers that are not otherwise easily available. Under section 32 of PACE, arrest enables officers to search a suspect and seize items, including mobile phones, which may contain evidence relevant to the investigation. Arrest can also enable the search of premises under sections 18 and 32 of PACE. Alternatives to arrest do not offer the same clarity or immediacy in accessing these powers. Arrest also enables officers to impose police bail conditions, which some officers valued as a means of preventing further offending and securing attendance. These are sometimes legitimate reasons to arrest a child. The problem arises when they become the default justification for detention as well as arrest. The powers that justify arrest do not automatically justify detention. Grounds for arrest (s24 PACE and Code G) are much wider than the grounds for detention at the police station (s37(3) PACE). That distinction is poorly understood by many frontline officers. The power under section 30A of PACE to release a child on street bail before they are taken to a police station is an important mechanism for enabling those post-arrest powers to be accessed, but without requiring a child to be transported to custody and exposed to the police custody environment. In practice, releasing a child on street bail would usually require the child to be taken home so that a parent, carer or other responsible adult can be present as their AA.

Across all four forces in the wider study, officers who were aware of the power described it as unfamiliar and rarely used. Officers typically reported that street bail was used only where a suspect was detained in hospital. In one force, an officer explained, "I'm a massive advocate for it but it's not used enough" (SWP2.PC7), whilst another observed, "We don't get much training on that power" (SWP1.PC3). The College of Policing's (2022b) APP on Response, Arrest and Detention includes a section on release before arrival at a police station, or street bail, but that section is expressly marked as no longer accurate for arrests made on or after 28 October 2022, following changes introduced by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. It also does not provide clear, child-specific guidance on how street bail should be used where the arrested person is a child. This is particularly important because the existing wording refers to the possible delay in accessing safeguards, including an AA, if a vulnerable person is not taken directly to a police station. In practice, however, street bail for a child would typically require the child to be taken home, or to another appropriate safe location, so that a parent, carer or other responsible adult can be present and arrangements can be made for attendance at the police station at a later time.

The result is a narrowing of the available options when a child comes to police attention. Where taking no action is inappropriate, and voluntary interview is insufficient to access investigatory powers and compel attendance, officers are routed towards bringing a child into custody in circumstances where that may be unnecessary.

Organisational and cultural drivers

Arrest decision-making is to a significant degree the result of institutional cultures and organisational structures that, across the English forces studied in particular, consistently favour arrest over diversion, enforcement over relationship and the transfer of risk over the exercise of judgement. Understanding why frontline officers default to arrest requires looking not at the officer in the moment, but at the institution that has shaped what that officer understands good policing to look like.

Performance indicators

In the English forces studied, the clearest signal available to frontline officers about what their organisation values is what gets counted. Stop and search figures and arrest numbers are visible, recorded and discussed, while prevention work is not. A neighbourhood officer in GMP put it plainly: "You can't measure prevention" (GMP2.NPC1). The result is that officers who build relationships with children, divert them from offending, and keep them out of the system have no way of demonstrating this as productive work, while officers who arrest can point to something concrete. This is not simply a perverse outcome of explicit arrest targets, though those exist in some forces. It is the more insidious consequence of measuring the visible and ignoring the rest. In GMP, for example, explicit arrest targets were not formally in existence at the time of observations. However, individual officer tallies of arrests and stop and search were visible on whiteboards in police stations, motivated by middle-management performance oversight and competition between teams. Response officers described feeling pressure to use stop and search and arrest powers, as these activities were widely understood to be markers of performance. Explicit arrest targets risk reproducing the distortions associated with earlier offences brought to justice and sanction detection targets, which were criticised for encouraging formal responses to low-level offending and widening children's entry into the youth justice system (Bateman 2008; Kemp 2014).

These organisational signals shape how discretion is exercised on the street. Where officers understand that performance is measured through enforcement activity, children are more likely to be searched, arrested and drawn further into the youth justice system. Children can become the most available and least resistant subjects of enforcement activity. They are more likely to be in public spaces, more likely to be in groups that attract attention, and less likely to know their rights or challenge an officer's grounds for stopping them. As one neighbourhood officer in GMP acknowledged candidly: "Kids hanging around on the streets are visible and this helps us to make our stop and searches" (GMP2.NPC1). As discussed above, children in deprived areas pay a disproportionate price for this logic.

Wider organisational and political messaging also shaped street-level discretion. Child-centred initiatives in forces were often challenged by contradictory messaging from senior management. In the three English forces examined, frontline officers described the institutional message in almost identical terms: "The chief says lock them up." Embedding child-centred approaches requires commitment from the very top of the force.

Domestic abuse and positive action

Positive action policies provide a particularly clear example of the impact of institutional dynamics on child arrest rates. In both the English and Welsh forces studied, the requirement to take positive action in domestic abuse cases was producing arrests of children in circumstances that officers themselves described as inappropriate. This emerged as a significant and under-examined driver of child arrests, warranting greater scrutiny.

The definition in section 1 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 encompasses abusive behaviour by children aged 16 and 17 towards those personally connected to them, including siblings and parents

or carers. Force positive action policies were commonly interpreted, especially by less experienced officers, as requiring arrest. As a result, officers described arresting children for minor offences arising out of domestic incidents: “From the age of 16, we’ll arrest a child for DV 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” (SWP2.PC7). Another officer described arresting children ‘by rote’ in an effort to comply with force policy (SWP1.PC2). While such policies are important in protecting victims, when applied without guidance distinguishing between adult perpetrators and children caught up in family conflict, particularly in relation to minor offences, they can produce arrests that serve neither the child nor the victim.

The following examples are drawn from three of the four forces involved and all include children being brought into custody for the first time:

- A 16-year-old boy was arrested after shoving his mother when she nags him about smoking cannabis. In a separate incident, a 14-year-old on his way to school is arrested because his parents called the police when he pushed past them in the doorway.
- A 12-year-old was arrested after a tantrum during which she shouted at her parents, saying she wanted to kill them. She is arrested and held overnight for making threats to kill, and leaves in the morning still in her dressing gown, holding her toy elephant.
- A 17-year-old Black girl who was looked after was arrested for criminal damage after throwing a bowl of noodles and a cup of tea at the wall of her care home during an argument about staff reporting her behaviour to her parents (discussed above).

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, more robust gatekeeping by custody officers (discussed in the accompanying custody report) and earlier engagement of partner agencies are all needed to ensure that these policies achieve their protective purpose without unnecessary criminalisation of children.

Pragmatism

A less visible but significant driver of unnecessary arrest is the distribution of workload within the organisation. In GMP, when a response officer arrests a child, their responsibility for that child effectively ends at the custody desk. The child is handed over to an investigation team, the officer returns to their duties, and responsibility for the case file and eventual outcome, often following months of uncertainty for the child and their family, passes to someone else. Arrest is, in this sense, a transfer not only of the child, but also of risk, responsibility and workload. This is not a claim about individual motivation. Officers are not cynically transferring children to avoid work. Response teams were operating at the limits of their capacity, under considerable pressure from response times and caseloads. By contrast, in SWP, frontline officers were more likely to ‘carry’ their own cases from first contact through to disposal. Where an officer knows they will be responsible for the outcome, the calculation changes. The additional coordination required for voluntary attendance no longer provides the same incentive to arrest instead. The child’s case becomes part of the officer’s own workload either way. As one SWP officer observed:

I start with the alternatives to arrest. Other teams might start with an arrest and then think whether there are any alternatives. Sometimes we come on shift and pick people up in the cells and think, ‘Why have they arrested this person?’ It can save time and money and you can often get better outcomes if you don’t arrest (SWP2.PC4).

It should be noted, however, that SWP's approach of carrying cases through to disposal is not straightforwardly positive in its effects. Some officers described choosing neither to arrest nor to use voluntary attendance where it seemed likely that the case would result in no further action, in order to avoid what they regarded as a purposeless administrative burden. In some cases, taking no further investigative action may well be the right response: the police encounter itself may be sufficient, or the child may need welfare support rather than criminal investigation. However, decisions not to pursue an investigation should be grounded in the child's circumstances and the needs of the case, rather than driven primarily by workload considerations. The goal is not fewer arrests as an end in itself, but better decision-making.

Risk

Risk aversion is another significant driver of arrest. For a frontline officer uncertain about how to respond to a child, arrest removes both the need for complex risk analysis and personal accountability for any unforeseen outcomes. If something goes wrong after a child is identified as a potential suspect but not arrested, the officer who made that decision may feel personally exposed. Once the child is handed to custody, accountability shifts to the custody officer.

This logic is not unique to individual officers: it is built into the institutional structure of policing. It helps explain why custody officers, even when inclined to refuse detention, rarely do so in practice. One officer explained the logic: "If custody refuse children then it puts the risk on them and not us. They carry the risk because they've refused to detain – that's why they'll rarely refuse to take someone into custody" (SWP2.PC9). This is arrest used not as a proportionate investigative response, but as a means of institutional risk transfer.

This helps to explain why the introduction of supervisory authorisation for child arrests in GMP was associated with a marked reduction in child custody detentions: by requiring a supervisor to share responsibility for the arrest decision, it redistributed risk in a way that changed behaviour. As part of this research, supervisory guidance for response sergeants was developed in collaboration with GMP, alongside a flowchart for frontline officers to support decision-making. The flowchart encourages officers to begin with consideration of the least intrusive response, taking account of offence seriousness through the Child Gravity Matrix for children (NPCC 2025b), and only progressing to arrest where other less intrusive options, such as voluntary attendance, are not considered appropriate. GMP introduced the supervisory guidance in July 2024. Local accounts from GMP indicated that child custody detentions fell by around 100 per month following its introduction, while Home Office (2025b) arrest data show a 12.5% reduction in arrests of 10- to 17-year-olds in GMP between the year ending March 2024 and the year ending March 2025.

A generic version of the supervisory guidance and decision-making flowchart, suitable for adoption by any police force, is provided in Annex B. Building on this work, we developed a [Child First Custody Toolkit](#), which brings together updated versions of the supervisory guidance and flowchart with additional national guidance for custody officers, reviewing inspectors and senior leaders to support the implementation of a Child First approach.

Scepticism and punitiveness

Risk aversion operates alongside a further cultural driver: scepticism about whether diversion works, and a residual belief among some officers that a period in custody serves a legitimate purpose for children who offend. An investigating officer from one of the forces in the wider study explained: "Custody is a consequence, if you break the law. Surely there needs to be a consequence? And if it is a short, sharp shock of custody, then brilliant." Both attitudes were observed across the forces studied, and both operate as a brake on Child First approaches even where training and guidance point in a different direction.

Several officers expressed doubt that diversion produced meaningful consequences for children. Where officers have no working relationship with the YJS, have never seen a diversion pathway function, and receive no feedback on what happens after a referral, it is difficult to develop confidence in alternatives to the formal process. Declining to arrest felt, for some officers, like allowing a child to get away with something. This scepticism is not always well-founded, but it is the scepticism of officers who have been left to make consequential decisions without the information or experience that would allow them to think differently.

Alongside this sits a more explicitly punitive attitude. As noted in the preceding section on training, some officers expressed the view that arrest and a period in custody were an appropriate and timely consequence for children who offended. These attitudes reveal a fundamental misconception about the purpose of police custody, which is investigative rather than punitive, and a lack of awareness of the research evidence that custody can be traumatic for children and is associated with increased rather than reduced reoffending (McAra and McVie 2010; Bevan 2022).

These cultural attitudes cannot be addressed through structural change alone. Child First training that engages directly with the evidence base and takes officers' instincts seriously rather than dismissing them is essential. Officers who understand why minimum intervention produces better outcomes, not just that it is required, are more likely to apply it consistently.

Recommendations

Legal and operational barriers to alternatives to arrest

The evidence set out above shows that the available alternatives to arrest are too often narrowed in practice. Where no action is inappropriate, and voluntary interview is insufficient to access investigatory powers or secure attendance, officers may be routed towards bringing a child into custody in circumstances where that may be unnecessary. Clearer legal, statutory and operational guidance is therefore needed on child arrest, voluntary attendance, contemporaneous and app-based interviewing, and street bail. The following recommendations are intended to widen the practical options available to officers, while ensuring that children's rights and safeguards are protected.

Recommendation 10: Legislative and regulatory change

Codes G and C of PACE should be updated to reflect the current legal framework for children, including the duty under section 11 of the Children Act 2004, the child's best interests as a primary consideration, as confirmed in *ST v Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire Police*, and the principle that arrest and detention should be used only as a last resort. Code G should include explicit guidance on the requirement for anxious scrutiny of a decision to arrest a child. A dedicated annex to Code C should bring together all child-specific adjustments and requirements for police custody in one accessible place.

Recommendation 11: A structured presumption in favour of voluntary attendance for children

Forces should introduce a structured presumption in favour of voluntary attendance when investigating a child suspected of an offence, supported by guidance and mandatory training on how to arrange it, including outside office hours. The VA sergeant model developed in SWP, which ensures that risk assessment, AA and legal advice requirements are consistently met and recorded, provides a model that other forces should consider adopting.

Recommendation 12: Consistent recording and public reporting of voluntary attendance data for children

Since March 2024, forces have been required to record voluntary interview data. The Home Office should ensure that this requirement is consistently implemented across all forces and that data is reported publicly on an annual basis. Reporting should include, as a minimum, the volume of voluntary interviews conducted with children disaggregated by force, alongside the ratio of voluntary

interviews to child arrests, whether legal advice was requested and provided, and the case outcome. This would enable meaningful monitoring of progress towards voluntary attendance as the default investigative approach for children, and allow forces, inspectorates and the public to assess whether the cultural shift required is being achieved in practice.

Recommendation 13: National guidance on contemporaneous and app-based interviewing with children

Government should issue clear national guidance on the use of contemporaneous and app-based interviewing with children, emphasising the mandatory requirement to offer legal advice before any interview proceeds, regardless of setting and requiring forces to have a process in place to enable that right should the child seek to exercise it. The guidance should make clear that a mobile app can appropriately assist officers when engaging with children informally, including taking them home and speaking with carers about the child's behaviour and welfare needs, but should not be used to facilitate a formal interview where a criminal investigation is being pursued and where access to free and independent legal advice cannot be assured.

Recommendation 14: Guidance and training on the use of street bail

The College of Policing (2013) should update its APP on Detention and Custody to reflect the current legal framework governing pre-charge bail and to provide clear and specific guidance on the use of street bail under section 30A of PACE for children. This should include the circumstances in which street bail may be appropriate, the procedure for its use, and how a child can be safely released before arrival at custody, including by taking the child home or to another appropriate safe location where a parent, carer or other responsible adult can be present. The current APP does not provide sufficient child-specific guidance and the section on release before arrival at a police station is expressly marked as no longer accurate for arrests made on or after 28 October 2022. All forces should ensure that frontline officers receive training on street bail as a distinct and important alternative to detention, clearly distinguishing it from voluntary attendance. Street bail is included as a prompt to frontline officers in the supervisory guidance and decision-making flowchart set out in Annex B and in the [Child First Custody Toolkit](#).

Organisational and cultural barriers

Legal and operational reform is necessary, but it will not be sufficient on its own. Decisions about children are also shaped by organisational culture, leadership, supervision, resource pressures and performance frameworks. These factors influence whether officers feel able to use alternatives to arrest and detention, and whether Child First principles are embedded in everyday practice.

Recommendation 15: Child-specific performance indicators

Building on the stop and search indicators set out in recommendation 5, forces should develop broader performance indicators that capture good practice with children. These should include the use of voluntary attendance as an alternative to detention and the use of OOCs and other diversionary pathways. Current performance frameworks create perverse incentives even where explicit arrest targets do not exist, and indicators that focus solely on arrest and stop and search numbers are liable to frustrate Child First initiatives.

Recommendation 16: Leadership commitment to Child First approaches

Child First principles should be embedded explicitly in forces' overarching strategic planning documents so that they are reflected consistently from senior leadership to the frontline. Senior leaders should actively champion Child First and child-centred approaches in force communications and internal messaging, making clear that arrest and stop and search are not markers of good performance when used disproportionately or unnecessarily with children.

Recommendation 17: Review of domestic abuse positive action policy as applied to children

All forces should review their approach to domestic abuse cases involving children, particularly those aged 16 and 17, to ensure that arrest is not applied automatically without appropriate consideration of necessity, proportionality and the child's age and circumstances. 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.

Recommendation 18: Supervisory authorisation of child arrests

All forces should introduce a requirement for supervisory oversight of decisions to arrest and bring a child into police custody. The supervising officer should confirm, before the child is taken to custody, that arrest and detention are necessary and proportionate, that the Child Gravity Matrix has been considered, and that all appropriate less intrusive alternatives have been explored. Whether that supervisory role is fulfilled by a response or custody officer is a matter of operational preference. A generic version of the supervisory guidance and decision-making flowchart developed collaboratively with GMP is set out in Annex B and an updated version in the [Child First Custody Toolkit](#).

Recommendation 19: Operational guidance and flowchart on less intrusive alternatives to arrest

Clear operational guidance should be provided to all frontline officers on less intrusive alternatives to arrest, including informal action, community resolutions and point of arrest diversionary pathways, voluntary attendance, the limited circumstances in which contemporaneous interviewing may be appropriate, police protection powers under section 46 of the Children Act 1989, and street bail under section 30A of PACE. Officers need clarity on when each can appropriately be used, the procedure for engaging them, any notification requirements, and what protections should be in place for a child. This guidance should be supported by a decision-making flowchart, examples of which are set out in Annex B, and in updated form in the [Child First Custody Toolkit](#).

Chapter 6: Diversion and out-of-court resolutions

Child First principles require that diversion and minimum intervention should be the default response to children who come into conflict with the law. Where a child comes to police attention as a suspected offender, the question of whether they need to enter the formal criminal justice system at all should be asked before any other. For many children, the answer should be that they do not. The research evidence is clear that early diversion, before a child acquires a formal record, produces better outcomes both for the child and for the communities they live in (McAra and McVie 2007a).

Where an arrest does not result in a charge, what happens to the child is determined less by a coherent framework than by the knowledge and inclinations of the officer involved, the availability of partner-agency support, and the disposal options of which the officer is aware and is willing to use. For many children taken into police custody, the answer is nothing: no referral, no support, no intervention. The case is recorded as no further action (NFA) and the child is released. As the Government acknowledges in the White Paper, early intervention and the right support are essential to prevent harmful behaviour from escalating and becoming entrenched (Ministry of Justice 2026:26ff).

A range of OOCRs is available. Informal disposals, such as community resolutions and restorative justice, do not result in a criminal sanction. Formal disposals, including youth cautions and youth conditional cautions, do. It is important to note that a community resolution, while often described and experienced as informal, is not without consequence. It may be disclosed on an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check and has real implications for a child's future employment, education and voluntary work. Home Office (2026c) outcomes guidance requires the suspect and, in the case of a child, their parent or guardian to be made aware that they will be recorded as responsible for the offence and informed of the full implications of this. Children and their families are not always aware of these consequences, and officers do not always make them clear. The apparent informality of a community resolution can obscure its significance, particularly where a child agrees to one without legal advice or a full understanding of what they are accepting.

As Smith (2025) notes, the requirement to admit an offence or accept responsibility before becoming eligible for diversion can place children under pressure to do so in order to avoid formal processing, regardless of whether this accurately reflects what happened. This concern is not merely theoretical. In BWV-S5, one of the encounters included in the BWV review, three children were stopped and searched after entering a derelict house through an open window. Following a negative search, and with the officer accepting that trespass is a civil rather than a criminal matter, a community resolution with a restorative justice element was nonetheless the outcome pursued at the request of the owner. This required the children to admit wrongdoing and apologise, despite no criminal offence having been committed and no damage caused. This strikingly illustrates how children can be drawn unnecessarily into quasi-criminal processes and directly contradicts Child First principles of minimum intervention.

Outcome data and national trends

While Child First is now the stated direction of travel for the youth justice system, the outcome data point in the opposite direction. There has been a 43% national decline in the use of OOCRs since 2015 (Centre for Justice Innovation 2026), a trend reflected in the outcome data across the forces studied. As noted above, the number of children arrested nationally fell by 74% over the ten years to March 2020 (YJB/Ministry of Justice 2021). This reflected both the financial pressures of austerity, which made the cost of bringing a child into custody increasingly difficult to justify, and a deliberate policy shift away from criminalising children for minor offences. Instead, officers were encouraged to deal with children informally for low-level offences, or to use voluntary attendance and diversion instead

of custody (Kemp 2020). The intention to reduce the number of children entering the formal justice system was achieved.

Over a decade later, based on our quantitative analysis of custody record data for the year ending March 2023, drawn from five police forces, the outcome data are more difficult to explain. Given the substantial reduction in the number of children entering police custody, those who are detained might be expected to represent a more serious subset of cases. Yet the proportion taken to court fell from 42% in 2009 to 22% in the aggregate data for the year ending March 2023, while OOCRs also declined from 26% to 11%. No further action (NFA), meanwhile, rose from 32% in 2009 to 61% in 2023 (Kemp and others 2011; Kent and others 2026).

Some caution is needed in interpreting these trends. In particular, Outcomes 20, 21 and 22, where no further action is taken but there has been YJS involvement, are not readily identifiable within these data.¹⁰ However, this does not explain the scale of the increase. In the custody record data analysed by Kemp and others (2023) for 2019 to 2021, 59% of children received NFA at a time when Outcome 22 was not being used by any of the forces examined. The 2023 custody record data analysed for this study do not allow Outcomes 20–22 to be reliably distinguished from other NFA outcomes. The data also do not capture where a child may have accessed another form of voluntary support, such as Turnaround, local authority Early Help schemes or other local pre-charge interventions.¹¹ Nor does the 2023 custody record analysis fully reflect more recent developments in diversionary practice.

Even accounting for these limitations, the custody record data cannot be read as evidence of a system working more effectively. Rather, it suggests that children continue to be processed through police custody in circumstances where no formal criminal justice outcome follows, calling into question the proportionality of its use in many of those cases. The available data suggest that many children may still leave custody without any identifiable supportive intervention (Kent and others 2026). Where such intervention does occur, it is not consistently visible in custody record data or available in a form that can subsequently be linked to those records.

The concern identified by this research is therefore not that diversionary and voluntary support pathways do not exist, but that they are not consistently visible, understood or available to frontline officers at the point when decisions about arrest, referral and informal resolution are being made.

This lack of visibility is also important when considering how children move into diversionary outcomes. For children detained for questioning, custody is the more visible route through which an OOCR may be recorded, yet, as the figures above show, only 11% ultimately receive one. Interviewing a child outside custody through voluntary attendance should, in principle, be preferred where arrest is not necessary. However, voluntary attendance remains significantly underused, as discussed above, and case outcomes following voluntary attendance are not routinely tracked in a way that allows comparison with custody outcomes.

National YJB statistics provide only a partial picture: they can show trends in youth justice outcomes, including diversionary outcomes, but they do not capture the full volume of children dealt with informally, through voluntary attendance, or otherwise outside custody by frontline officers. As a result, it is not possible to know what proportion of all children dealt with by police receive a diversionary outcome, voluntary support, prosecution, or no further action.

¹⁰ Nationally published statistics on the frequency of these outcomes are only available for the calendar year 2025, when around 7,500 NFA outcomes were recorded as Outcome 20, 21 or 22 in England and Wales (YJB 2026b). However, this figure does not distinguish between Outcome 20–22 records that followed a period in custody and those that followed voluntary attendance.

¹¹ Between December 2022 and end of December 2024, Turnaround received 38,704 referrals, with 15,705 children entering the intervention phase (Turner and others 2026:36).

No formal outcome, but lasting consequences

The significance of these data is therefore not only that many children leave custody or investigation without a formal outcome, but that the process itself may have lasting effects, particularly where cases are delayed, unresolved or poorly explained. Research on youth justice has long shown that formal system contact can be stigmatising and may deepen children's involvement rather than support desistance (McAra and McVie 2010). The harms associated with police contact are not confined to formal criminal justice outcomes. Several children described wider impacts on their education, future opportunities and sense of identity. One participant explained that, after being accused of an offence at the age of 15, he was effectively prevented from continuing his education in the usual way. Although he remained determined to complete his GCSEs, he described having to teach himself because he was no longer welcome at school. He later found himself unable to take up a place in sixth form. Reflecting on these experiences, he stated: "I was found not guilty but from being 15 it has ruined my life" (Child1.3). He described how the accusation itself affected the way he was viewed by others and limited his opportunities to move on. As he explained, "I got into trouble again because I couldn't make any new friends." Local perceptions of him were shaped by what had happened, limiting his ability to form new friendships, contributing to his continued association with the same peer group, and drawing him into further difficulties. Despite these setbacks, he remained determined to rebuild his future, explaining: "I want to get into cyber security and make something of my life" (Child1.3).

Similar themes emerged elsewhere. Another participant spoke about not being allowed to return to school following police involvement. Aged 16, he was attempting to enter college because he wanted to obtain the qualifications needed to pursue a career as a barber (Child1.2). These accounts illustrate how the consequences of police contact can extend well beyond the immediate encounter. Even where cases do not result in formal criminal justice outcomes, the experience of investigation, barriers to education, damage to reputation and disruption to future opportunities may have lasting effects on children's lives. This is particularly significant given the well-established relationship between exclusion, alternative provision and later disadvantage, including increased vulnerability to later justice-system contact (Kent and others 2023). The Department for Education (2018) has recognised that children in alternative provision are among the most vulnerable in the education system and that successful transitions back into mainstream education, employment and training are critical to improving life chances. Children who experience exclusion or prolonged disruption to their education following police involvement may therefore face consequences that extend far beyond the immediate police encounter, affecting educational attainment, employment opportunities and wider life chances.

The Welsh contrast

The available Welsh data sharpen the picture. In Welsh forces in 2019–21, 22% of children received an OOCR and 46% had no further action taken, compared with 11% and 59% respectively in English forces (Kemp and others 2023). Our analysis of custody record data from five forces for 2022/23, one of which was Welsh, suggests this pattern has persisted. The Welsh force had a notably higher rate of OOCRs (19.6% vs 9.2% in the four English forces), a higher charge rate (30.7% vs 19.3%), and a considerably lower NFA rate (44.2% vs 64.3%) (Kent and others 2026). This may indicate a more selective approach to arrest and detention in the Welsh force examined, with children brought into custody more likely to receive a formal outcome. These differences in charge and diversion rates are striking and consistent across both periods. They point to cultural and operational differences between forces, although the available data cannot fully exclude differences in offence mix or case seriousness.

The OOCR framework in practice

In principle, the OOCR framework is structured and child-centred (HMIP and HMICFRS 2025), but in practice it is inconsistently applied, poorly understood by many frontline officers, and dependent on partner agency engagement that is often unavailable at the point when it is needed most. Racial disproportionality compounds these failings: Black and mixed heritage children are less likely to be diverted than their White peers, and more likely to be prosecuted (Brodie and others 2025). Both GMP and SWP had referral forms or structured processes intended to support consideration of OOCRs and diversion. These forms created a route by which information about the child and the circumstances of the incident could be brought to the attention of the relevant YJS for diversion to be considered. However, the evidence from this study suggests that YJS expertise was not consistently embedded in frontline decision-making at the point of arrest. In practice, YJS input tended to occur only after the child had already entered custody or after a decision had been made to refer the case for assessment, rather than supporting diversionary decision-making in real time at the point of arrest.

As required by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, police officers are seconded to YJSs to assist with decisions about children coming to police attention. However, their role tends to focus on decision-making after a child has been referred to the YJS for consideration of an OOCR. Their contribution earlier in the process, particularly at the point of arrest, is much more limited. GMP frontline officers seldom drew on this resource when making decisions at the point of arrest, and many were unaware that it existed. In SWP, the seconded YJS police officers were more directly involved, monitoring children brought into custody, reviewing detention logs and advising on diversion options. This is important because early YJS input can inform disclosure and enable lawyers to provide children with more tailored advice about how to respond in interview. In both forces, however, this resource was not available beyond the end of the working day, precisely when the majority of children came to police attention: 70% arrived after 4.00 pm (Kent and others 2026).

The referral process itself can also limit officers' understanding of diversionary options. In both forces, decisions about OOCRs are channelled through a referral form completed by the investigating officer and reviewed by a supervisor before being passed to the YJS. While this process enables multi-agency input and proportionate decision-making, it also means that frontline officers are not required to develop any substantive understanding of diversionary options or YJS processes. In SWP, officers welcomed this arrangement precisely because it avoided this complexity: as one participant remarked, "there's a lot to know, more knowledge for the officer to take on board" (SWP1.CP5). In GMP, a YJS officer was explicit about the expectation: "I keep saying to them [frontline officers], they don't need to know the disposals. Just send it through and we'll decide what's the best outcome based on the assessment" (GMP.YJS1). There are certainly advantages to these referral processes and the multi-agency, holistic assessment that follows at diversion panels. However, the practical result can be a deskilling of the frontline: officers complete the form without understanding what follows, and in some cases without understanding what they are referring for. As one OOCR officer observed: "Some officers don't know what they're doing or why they're doing it" (GMP.OOCR1). This is compounded by the absence of feedback: in many cases the frontline officer who made the referral is not informed of the outcome (or not aware of how to access that information), meaning they do not build an understanding of what outcomes are given for particular offences or whether the child engaged. Officers therefore have no positive experience of diversion to draw on when making decisions at the point of arrest or when speaking to victims about alternatives to arrest or prosecution, limiting their effectiveness in both respects.

These challenges are further compounded by uncertainty surrounding Outcome 22, which allows a case to be concluded as NFA, without a formal criminal justice outcome, where a child is referred to

early intervention or support. This disposal has significant potential as a diversionary tool, but its use is inconsistent and poorly monitored. A joint inspection by HMIP and HMICFRS (2025) found that the absence of a clear national framework had produced a postcode lottery, raising concerns about fairness and disproportionality.

A complicating factor is that Outcome 22 is also used for deferred prosecution, where the evidential basis differs significantly from that required for straightforward no further action accompanied by support, yet there is no agreed definition of how these two uses should be distinguished or recorded. In practice, discussion of the OOCR framework tends to treat deferred prosecution separately, without acknowledging the confusion that arises when both are recorded as Outcome 22. Additionally, the fact that Outcome 22 is not recorded as a 'resolution' for recording purposes discourages its use. In this regard, we welcome the Government's proposals for the introduction of Outcomes 23 and 24 for deferred prosecution, and for a wider child OOCR framework (Ministry of Justice 2026:41).

The YJS assessment process

For those children who do proceed to an OOCR assessment, whether via custody or voluntary attendance, the process that follows is a further source of delay. Referrals typically take two to four weeks to pass from the referring officer to the seconded YJS officer and wider YJS team, after which the YJS generally takes a further three to four weeks to complete the initial assessment in preparation for the Joint Decision-Making Panel (Farrell and others 2025). By the time any intervention is agreed, at least five weeks, and commonly up to eight weeks, have elapsed since the offence. In practice, as both the GMP and SWP research confirms, it is frequently considerably longer.

This delay matters for several interconnected reasons. Research suggests that the faster support is provided after an offence, the more likely it is to have a positive impact on the child's outcomes (Murdoch 2015). Delay also increases the risk that children disengage entirely from whatever process has been set in motion, as officers in this study described. And perhaps most fundamentally, delay breaks the connection between the child and the offence that any meaningful intervention depends upon.

Officers in the GMP research described cases where a child had already been willing to apologise and make reparation, with the substantive work for a community resolution having effectively been done, but by the time the referral process had run its course, weeks had passed, the child had disengaged and the only available outcome was no further action. The process had consumed what the officer had already built. As one neighbourhood PC remarked: "The delays in sending cases to the YJS team make it quite hard for us to deal with cases" (GMP2.NPC2).

The YJS assessment process and the multi-agency panel that follows serve a genuinely important function for children with more complex needs and more concerning offending patterns. They enable a holistic picture to be built, vulnerabilities to be identified, and a tailored support package to be put in place. YJS teams can offer meaningful, bespoke intervention, and practitioners are genuinely committed to child-centred practice (Farrell and others 2025). The problem is that applying the same process uniformly to all cases, including low-level first-time offences where a frontline officer has already done the substantive work, produces what officers themselves described as a conveyor belt: a production line generating paperwork, delay and outcomes that arrive too late to be meaningful.

There are diversionary options available to frontline officers and investigators without full referral to the YJS. These include community resolutions, subject to notification of the YJS for oversight.¹² Many

¹² See NPCC (2022b) guidance on community resolutions, which provides that YJS should be notified of community resolutions issued to children for oversight and monitoring purposes.

force areas also have Early Help and other voluntary support options to which children and their families can be directed. This is an area of active development. Turnaround, Outcome 22, Early Help and local pre-charge intervention pathways have strengthened the range of options available in many areas. The difficulty observed in this study was not the absence of such pathways in principle, but the extent to which frontline officers knew about them, understood the criteria for using them, and could access timely advice or feedback when making decisions in real time. The evidence of this study supports the Government's observation that officers need to be better equipped with 'structures, processes and skills' to make effective diversionary decisions for children (Ministry of Justice 2026:43). However, the research suggests that this support is needed more urgently than the wider policing reforms set out in the Home Office White Paper (2026a) are likely to deliver.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to strengthen the diversionary options available to frontline officers and investigators, and to ensure that they can be used quickly, consistently and transparently. They recognise that reform is needed not only to the national OOCR framework, but also to the practical pathways, timescales and feedback mechanisms that enable officers to make confident diversionary decisions for children.

Recommendation 20: Government endorsement of a clearer national OOCR framework

The Government's commitment in the May 2026 Youth Justice White Paper to fundamental reform of the OOCR framework for children is welcome, including the move to give deferred prosecution its own outcome code for children. Further reform is needed. Outcome 22 should be recorded and reported as a positive police outcome, distinct from deferred prosecution. Forces should also be required to record and report OOCR decisions for children disaggregated by age, ethnicity and offence type, to enable monitoring of disproportionality and consistency of practice.

Recommendation 21: A fast-track pathway for low-level offending

A fast-track pathway for low-level offending should be developed in every force area, supported by YJS input, so that a community resolution can be imposed, or an Outcome 22 pathway initiated, within days of an offence rather than weeks. This would reduce the disengagement that protracted processes risk and bring any intervention closer to the behaviour it is intended to address. Additional YJS resource will be required to enable earlier involvement in cases, though this should be offset by a reduction in the volume of cases referred to the full OOCR panel.

Recommendation 22: Target timescales for OOCR referrals and a feedback loop to the frontline

Forces should introduce target timescales for referral to the YJS, minimising the delay between the offence and any diversionary work. 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 practicable, to support professional development and ensure frontline officers build a working understanding of how diversion operates in practice.

Chapter 7: Multi-agency welfare responses and voluntary support

The multi-agency infrastructure available to children who come to police attention is, on paper, substantial. Across the forces studied, frontline officers were expected to submit a referral form following engagement with a child where welfare or safeguarding concerns were identified, flagging issues to be passed to multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH) or equivalent safeguarding arrangements (College of Policing 2022c; Department for Education 2026). These are known by various names in the different force areas (e.g. public protection notices (PPNs) and care action plans (CAPs)). MASH officers review these referrals and can pass them to specialist policing teams dealing with child protection, safeguarding or exploitation, or to partner agencies including children's social care and the YJS. Local authority Early Help schemes provide a further layer of voluntary, non-statutory support.

Nationally, the Turnaround programme, funded by the Ministry of Justice, provides tailored voluntary and family-focused support at the earliest opportunity and is open to a wide group of children, including those released from custody on bail, released under investigation, invited to attend for voluntary interview, given a no further action outcome, or referred for low-level anti-social behaviour (Turner and others 2026). The extension of this funding for a further three years, announced in the White Paper, is welcome (Ministry of Justice 2026).

Within this national framework, individual forces develop their own local initiatives. In GMP, these include Borough Prevention Hubs and the prevention, prosecution, intervention, education and diversion (PPIED) initiative. In SWP, Cardiff has well-structured exploitation and missing-person pathways available following a multi-agency safeguarding meeting (MASM).

The lack of information available to the frontline

However, from the perspective of the frontline officer in both forces, the multi-agency welfare infrastructure is largely invisible and unavailable to them in real time. Welfare referral forms disappear into what officers themselves described as a black hole, with little or no feedback, no visible outcome, and no basis for building any understanding of what happened to the child or whether the referral made a difference. The information exists somewhere in the system; it is simply not accessible to the officer when they need it. This causes frustration on the frontline and creates a danger that a child in need of welfare support is reduced to another paper exercise, completed without any meaningful result.

Children coming to police attention will often already have some form of welfare or safeguarding support around them, from exploitation teams, children's services or Early Help. As Byrne (2023:202) observes, mainstream safeguarding services are increasingly recognising their responsibilities to vulnerable children who offend, and there is a growing movement towards genuinely Child First responses in which the child remains at the centre regardless of which system they are nominally engaged with. Yet the research revealed that, in practice, once a child crosses from the welfare track into the criminal justice track, that wraparound support tends to become less available. Agencies working with a child on safeguarding or exploitation grounds are understandably wary of engaging in conversations that might generate material relevant to a criminal investigation. For legitimate legal reasons, they may therefore step back at precisely the point when the child most needs continuity of support. The structural separation between the two tracks means that the child who is arrested or under investigation is liable to find that the support built around them as a vulnerable child recedes at this critical juncture.

A further dimension is worth noting. For some children, contact with the criminal justice system is what triggers a welfare response that should have happened earlier. The offence becomes the mechanism through which unmet need finally comes to attention. This is a poor substitute for early intervention, and it points to a deeper problem: a welfare system that has contracted to the point where the criminal justice system is filling the gap. The implications of this for practice in custody are examined in the custody report.

The evidence on intervention and the case for change

The case for early and timely intervention is reinforced by the broader evidence base on what works. Research points clearly toward minimum intervention and maximum diversion as the most effective approach for children, particularly first-time entrants (Smith 2025). McAra and McVie's (2007a) well-established findings, drawn from their longitudinal study of children in Edinburgh, demonstrate that early contact with the criminal justice system can trigger labelling processes that entrench rather than reduce offending. By way of example, the evaluation of the HALT diversion project in the Netherlands found that participation in a formal intervention increased the probability of reoffending by 39% compared to cases where no action was taken (Vooren and others 2023). Smith's (2025) systematic review of diversion for first-time entrants provides broader support for this position. No studies found diversion to be significantly less effective than formal processing, while diversion had the potential to reduce reoffending, process cases more quickly and lower costs. Quicker resolution is also preferable for victims. One important caution is the risk of net-widening: drawing children into even informal processes in ways that increase rather than reduce their contact with the system (Centre for Justice Innovation 2024). This reinforces the case for minimum intervention in lower-level cases, including the appropriate use of Outcome 22 where some supportive response is required without formal entry into the youth justice system.

This evidence sits in direct tension with attitudes commonly found within policing. The police are a law enforcement agency, and many officers operate with the intuition that something formal must happen when a child offends and that without a tangible consequence nothing will change. Police custody is often experienced through this punitive lens, a point explored in detail in the companion custody report (Kemp and Bevan 2026a). That instinct is understandable, but the research evidence runs in the opposite direction: punitive responses, particularly early formal contact with the criminal justice system, are more likely to increase than reduce the likelihood of further offending (McAra and McVie 2007a; 2015). The question this raises is a structural one. If the evidence base points towards minimum intervention and maximum diversion, why does the system place the police, a law enforcement agency with enforcement instincts and performance frameworks oriented towards charge and prosecution, at the centre of decisions about what happens to children? The involvement of YJS practitioners, with their child-centred expertise and understanding of what actually reduces reoffending, needs to come much earlier in the process than it currently does. Child First training for officers can help to challenge punitive attitudes and build understanding of why a less interventionist approach produces better outcomes, but training alone is not enough. The system needs to be restructured so that child-centred expertise, from YJS, children's social care and other agencies, is available at the point when decisions about children are actually being made.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to bring youth justice expertise into frontline decision-making much earlier than currently occurs. The evidence from this study shows that YJS input is often available only after arrest, interview or referral, when key decisions have already been made. A more Child First approach requires frontline officers to have timely access to information, advice and local support pathways at the point when a child first comes to police attention, including outside ordinary office hours.

Recommendation 23: Structured access to YJS specialist advice at the point of arrest

Forces should work with YJS partners to establish structured mechanisms for frontline officers to access information about children already known to the YJS and to seek youth justice specialist advice at the point of arrest, before key decisions are made. Consistent access during working hours and meaningful out-of-hours provision are both essential. No formalised mechanism for this existed in any of the forces studied. Government should consider whether a statutory requirement for YJS availability at the point of arrest, on the model of the statutory requirement for seconded YJS officers, is needed to achieve consistency across forces.

Recommendation 24: Local child and family support information for frontline officers

Forces should work with local YJS and children's social care in each area to produce accessible and regularly updated information for frontline officers on available support for children and their families, including pathways for referral to Early Help, diversion services and voluntary support. Officers cannot be expected to consider alternatives to arrest if they do not know what those alternatives are or how to access them.

Recommendation 25: Earlier and more meaningful YJS involvement in decisions to refer for diversion

The involvement of YJS practitioners in decisions about children needs to come much earlier in the process than it currently does. The current system, structured to bring YJS in after the investigative stage has run its course, serves neither children with straightforward low-level cases nor those with more complex needs. Forces and YJS teams should work together to identify how YJS practitioners can be involved at the point of encounter rather than after interview, with a light-touch review mechanism for lower-level cases that avoids unnecessary referral to the full Joint Decision-Making Panel.

Recommendation 26: A funded pilot of YJS on-call support for frontline officers

Building on the structured access mechanisms proposed above, a funded pilot would allow the most promising models to be tested and evaluated before national rollout. The Ministry of Justice and the Youth Justice Board should commission and fund a pilot of YJS on-call support for frontline officers, working closely with YJSs, the Association of Youth Offending Team Managers, the NPCC and the Ministry of Justice's Youth Justice Policy team. The pilot should build on existing referral forms and local diversion processes, testing how they can be used earlier and more dynamically to support decisions before arrest or detention. Its purpose should be to identify a sustainable model for national rollout. The absence of any formalised mechanism of this kind across the forces studied represents a significant structural gap.

Chapter 8: Towards Child First frontline policing

The implications of this evidence are not that nothing should happen, but that what happens should be proportionate, prompt and connected to the child's actual circumstances. A child who apologises, makes reparation and moves on within days is in a fundamentally different position from one who waits two months for a panel decision about an offence they can barely recall. For children whose needs are more complex, those whose offending reflects exploitation, trauma or entrenched disadvantage, early YJS involvement is equally important, not to create further process but to identify what the child actually needs and begin providing it. The current system, structured to bring the YJS in after the investigative stage has run its course, serves neither group well.

The findings from this study of frontline policing tell a consistent story across the forces examined. A young and inexperienced workforce, often untrained in working with children, is making key decisions about children without access to the information, advice or alternatives that would allow them to respond differently. In the English forces, at least, they were also operating under institutional pressures that favoured arrest over diversion. Children living in deprived areas, Black children and looked after children are among those most visible to police and most likely to be drawn into stop and search, arrest and detention. Many are then processed through the system only to leave with no formal criminal justice outcome. But the processing itself can cause harm.

This points to a structural problem in the way youth justice policy in England and Wales is organised. While Child First is framed as the organising principle of the youth justice system, the gateway into that system sits elsewhere. The most consequential decisions about whether a child enters formal criminal justice processes are made not by youth justice practitioners but by frontline police officers at the point of encounter, arrest and detention. These decisions are typically taken by generalist officers working under operational pressures, with little or no training on child development, limited access to alternatives and limited engagement with youth justice partners. In practice, the entry point into youth justice is governed by policing culture and organisational priorities rather than by the child-centred principles that are supposed to guide the system as a whole. The result is a structural misalignment: a youth justice framework built around Child First principles that only begins to operate after the decisions that most determine whether a child enters the system have already been made.

There are early signs that where institutional signals change, officer behaviour changes with them. In South Wales, custody officers' increased willingness to refuse detention was beginning to send a message back to frontline officers that arrest could not be assumed to result in detention. As one neighbourhood sergeant put it: "They're trying to instil into the force that arrest is the last resort. There are other options and officers need to weigh up the risk. It helps now that custody are reluctant to authorise detention" (SWP1.NSgt1). In GMP, local accounts indicated that the introduction of supervisory authorisation for child arrests was followed by a reduction of around 100 child custody detentions per month across the force, while Home Office (2025 b) arrest data show a 12.5% reduction in arrests of 10- to 17-year-olds in GMP between the year ending March 2024 and the year ending March 2025. The data from the MPS Child First pilot point in the same direction: when custody officers are given a clear framework and the expectation that they will use it, they do. The impact of these and related custody changes, including the MPS and Surrey pilots, on frontline arrest behaviour is considered further in the companion custody report (Kemp and Bevan 2026 a).

The picture that emerges is not uniform across the English forces studied. However, the aggregate outcome data, together with the qualitative evidence from the fieldwork, point to a system in which arrest too often remains the easiest or most visible route, while alternatives are inconsistently available, multi-agency support is often absent at the point when it is most needed and performance

frameworks do too little to recognise diversionary practice. The Welsh force studied offers evidence of a different approach, reflected in higher OOCR rates and lower rates of no further action.

These findings matter because they show that the choice between arrest, diversion and no further action is shaped not only by the legal test for arrest and the seriousness of the alleged offence, but also by local systems, working relationships and organisational culture. Welsh officers, across both neighbourhood and response roles, described and demonstrated a more relational, less punitive approach to children. One officer said simply: “It’s different in Wales, not so punitive and arrest focused as it is in England” (SWP1.NPC1). A neighbourhood sergeant described the philosophy: “We like being visible and speaking to people. It’s not all about enforcing the law, we need to engage. Results are important but it’s about reducing risk, but this takes time” (SWP1.NSgt1).

This is not a romanticised account. There was significant variation between teams, and the domestic abuse policy created the same pressures on Welsh officers as on their English counterparts. However, the qualitative evidence suggests a different cultural starting point, and this is consistent with the outcomes data discussed above. What appears different is the absence of explicit pressure to treat stop and search and arrest as markers of performance. Where that pressure is absent, officers appear more willing to consider alternatives and use informal action.

Children's voices, feedback and accountability

The findings from both the observational research and the engagement work suggest that children have limited opportunities to challenge their experiences of police contact or to influence policing practice. Across stop and search and arrest encounters, young participants frequently described feeling unheard, insufficiently informed and uncertain about how concerns could be raised afterwards. The Sphear Media engagement indicated that 34 of the 45 children and young people who completed the questionnaire (76%) had wanted to complain about the way they had been treated but had not done so, commonly because they did not know how to complain, were not given an opportunity to do so, or did not believe that a complaint would result in meaningful action or change.

Child First policing requires not only that children are treated fairly during encounters, but also that they are able to contribute to the development, scrutiny and improvement of police practice. Analysis of the questionnaire findings indicated that concerns about policing were not confined to children with extensive criminal justice involvement. The Stockport school group comprised 12 Black and mixed heritage boys who had not experienced police custody or court proceedings. However, eight of the 12 had experienced stop and search, and in every case the search had found nothing. Their accounts suggested that, despite this, they felt subject to police attention because of their ethnicity and age.

While the Stockport school boys reported somewhat higher ratings of their experiences of policing than some of the youth justice and custody-experienced groups, their responses can hardly be described as positive. The highest average score they gave across the key measures was just under 5 out of 10, given in the category of ‘feeling respected’ by the police. On a 10-point scale, this represents a neutral or middling assessment rather than a strongly positive one. Scores relating to feeling listened to, feeling safe and overall experience of policing were lower still. By contrast, groups with more extensive police contact, including the Brixton, Salford and Cardiff participants, generally gave lower ratings, with average overall experience scores clustered around 2 out of 10. These findings suggest that concerns about fairness, respect and procedural justice are not simply a consequence of becoming entrenched within the criminal justice system, although repeated police contact appears to deepen negative perceptions.

This finding is particularly important because the Stockport school participants' perceptions appeared to be shaped not only by their own experiences, but also by what they observed happening within their communities and to other children. Several participants described feeling stereotyped, profiled or judged because of their appearance, ethnicity or clothing. Taken together with the wider findings on stop and search and disproportionality, these accounts suggest that concerns about police legitimacy may begin to develop long before a child experiences arrest, detention or court proceedings (Tyler 2006).

The accounts from children and young people show why reform cannot be designed from an adult or institutional perspective alone. If Child First approaches are to address the loss of trust associated with stop and search, arrest and detention, children's experiences must be built into the reform process.

Recommendation

Recommendation 27: Children as stakeholders in reform

Children with experience of stop and search and arrest should be actively involved as stakeholders in the development and implementation of Child First reforms, including the design of training and guidance and the scrutiny of police practice. This is not only consistent with Child First principles, but is essential to ensuring that reforms genuinely reflect children's needs and experiences.

Forces should introduce simple, accessible mechanisms for children to provide feedback on their encounters with the police and to make complaints. At present, the circumstances in which children encounter the police often make it difficult for them to know their rights, understand what has happened to them, or know how to raise concerns afterwards. A QR code provided at the end of a stop and search or arrest encounter, linking to an accessible feedback and complaints process, would be a practical and low-cost first step. Government should consider whether a statutory requirement to provide children with accessible information about their right to complain, in a format they can act on, is needed to achieve this consistently across forces.

Overall findings

This scoping study shows that Child First principles are not yet consistently embedded at the point of frontline police contact. The barriers identified are not simply matters of individual officer practice, but arise from a lack of training and guidance, organisational incentives and gaps in partner-agency provision. Taken together, the recommendations provide a framework for enabling officers to treat children as children, respond proportionately, avoid unnecessary criminalisation, strengthen diversion and welfare responses and connect children with appropriate support at the earliest opportunity. This matters because decisions made at the first point of police contact can determine whether a child is supported and diverted or drawn unnecessarily into the formal criminal justice system.

Developments reported by GMP following fieldwork

Following review of a draft of this report, GMP advised that it has continued to develop its approach to child-centred policing since the completion of fieldwork in early 2024. This has included further work to strengthen child-centred policing practices, support diversion from custody where appropriate, enhance decision-making involving children and develop the role of the Custody Coordination Unit (CCU).

According to GMP, these developments build on recommendations arising from previous inspections, inquiries and research, including the findings of the present study. This work forms part, GMP reported, of an ongoing programme of organisational reform and improvement intended to enhance outcomes for children who come into contact with the police.

The research team did not assess these developments directly and therefore cannot comment on their effectiveness or impact. However, they are noted here to provide context regarding developments reported by GMP since completion of the fieldwork period.

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Annex A: Overview of scoping study fieldwork

Table A1: Interviews conducted across GMP and SWP scoping studies

Force	Period	Shifts	Interview group	Details
GMP	Jan–Apr 2024	12 (6 Area 1 and 6 Area 2)	Frontline officers	37 interviews – 27 response and 10 neighbourhood officers: 31 police constables (PCs), 3 sergeants (Sgts), 2 inspectors (Insp), 1 chief inspector (CI)
			Specialist policing teams	15 interviews: 5 child protection and exploitation teams (CP), 3 prevention officers, 3 OOCR officers, 1 MASH Insp, 1 Right Care, Right Person officer, 1 YJS seconded officer, 1 call handler
			Other partner agencies	4 YJS managers
SWP	Jul–Dec 2025	13 (7 Area 1 and 6 Area 2)	Frontline officers	45 interviews: 35 response and 10 neighbourhood officers: 31 PCs, 7 police community support officers (PCSOs), 6 Sgts, 1 Insp
			Specialist policing teams	11 interviews: 3 child protection and exploitation officers, 4 YJS police officers, 2 missing-person officers, 1 community safety officer (CS), and 1 voluntary attendance officer (VA)
			Other partner agencies	5 interviews: 2 YJS managers, 1 Early Help (EH), 1 National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) and 1 youth worker (YW)

Annex B: Supervisory authorisation of child arrests: Guiding principles

This guidance is based on supervisory guidance developed by the research team in collaboration with GMP, which was subsequently published by GMP and adopted force-wide. This is a generic version suitable for adoption by any force. An updated version is included within the accompanying [Child First Custody Toolkit](#).

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 in 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 a voluntary 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. A less intrusive alternative to arrest 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. As with the 'Supervisory Authorisation of Child Arrest: Guiding Principles', an updated version of this flowchart is included within the accompanying [Child First Custody Toolkit](#).

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

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?
- If arrest is necessary, is detention in custody truly necessary? Consider street bail (s30A PACE). Can the child be taken home and bailed in the presence of a suitable adult?
- 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)