

28th January 2025

National Association of Youth Justice (NAYJ)

Response to Review into the Youth Justice Board (2024-25)

Trustees at the NAYJ have consolidated a response to inform the current review of the Youth Justice Board as follows:

- The NAYJ see the core functions of the YJB as providing guidance to, and oversight of, youth justice services and other organisations working with and for children and young people involved, or at risk of involvement in behaviour that causes harm. This role allows the YJB to be a body that can connect policy makers and practitioners across a disparate youth justice system, across both the statutory and voluntary sectors. We also now see the YJB being more of an advocacy role within Government for the needs and rights of children and young people. However, there has still been very little progress on key systemic issues affecting the most vulnerable children in society who become involved in the criminal justice system (e.g. regulation for children's homes and other spaces of care and overrepresentation of racially minoritised children). Additionally, the YJB provides information to the general public about specific criminal justice responses to children involved in offending behaviour.
- The NAYJ feels that the unique value of the YJB is the development of academic/research expertise alongside professional/practice knowledge which is currently leading to a better understanding of children's needs, rights and experiences of justice. It offers a way for the development of national level policy guidance and support of localised policy and practice guidance development in youth justice services, which in turn affects practice and children's experiences. However, there still requires a role to interpret what the YJB policy area means in practice, which is often prepared through successful cases in isolated contexts, at the expense of wider social and political contexts being dismissed. The YJB has limited influence on legislation change, and their role in this could increase the value of the organisation.

- The NAYJ believe it is vital that there is an independent public body delivering the YJB's functions on behalf of government, since it can focus on specific experiences, needs and rights of children involved in offending behaviour, including those who have been exploited – otherwise children risk being overlooked and sidelined by other departments, which is often the case with children who are involved in cases of serious of harm but where a welfare response through social care would be more appropriate. Also, the independence of the YJB can and should enable important messages about the treatment of children in conflict with the law which populist narratives within government fail to acknowledge at times.
- In order to play a role in supporting and facilitating a multi-agency approach to youth justice, the YJB could work more closely with welfare services. This is an area where considerable improvements are needed. Moreover, improvements are needed to better understand the voices of, and provided support for, voluntary and community sector organisations in the youth justice sector. They are frequently working with some of the most vulnerable children and operate in the most precarious circumstances, yet their participation in multi-agency work is vital to the safety and welfare of children. At the same time, there needs to be a delicate balance of recognising regional and local differences in delivering justice for and with children, since this can help develop a shared sense of what is happening in terms of policy and practice, and what might need to change in particular areas.
- The YJB data can be very helpful to get a sense of the size and shape of, and trends within, the youth justice sector. The annual 'Youth Justice Statistics', and the Youth Custody Statistics are particularly useful. There is likely more useful, relevant data and information held by the YJB that can, and should, be made available more widely. Or made accessible to researchers to explore further. The NAYJ has critically reviewed data published by the YJB and made use of this across the academic community. Developing the datasets to align with other children's departments could support better understanding of what prevention and diversion work may be more useful.