

NAYJ response to “A MODERN YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM - FOUNDATIONS FIT FOR THE FUTURE” and the announcement on tailored knife crime interventions for children

The NAYJ welcomes the Government’s unequivocal acknowledgment of the current failings in the criminal justice system for children, including too many children on remand and the fact children’s needs in prison are not met, in its policy paper, [A MODERN YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM - FOUNDATIONS FIT FOR THE FUTURE](#).

The increase in funding for local authorities to provide community placements instead of sending children to prison is long overdue and a positive step forward. The Government rightly acknowledges that the current position, where almost half of all children in prison are on remand, and two thirds of those children do not go on to get a prison sentence, is unacceptable.

It is also right that children who are detained must be provided with appropriate care and support. However, the NAYJ strongly believes that tweaking targets in prisons for time out of cell is never going to be sufficient: if the current rules on the provision of education were complied with, by providing face to face teaching, children would not be in solitary confinement. Prisons are no places for children. The Government should make good on the long-standing commitment to close children’s prisons and the one remaining Secure Training Centre and mandate that children who need to be detained should only be placed in secure children’s homes, where they can receive appropriate care and support.

The Government has also proposed to transfer financial and monitoring functions, currently managed by the arms-length Youth Justice Board (YJB), to the Ministry of Justice. Yet, if such funds are to be moved from the YJB to a government department, consideration should be given to transferring them to the Department for Education, in line with the government’s child first principle.

The [announcement](#) to provide tailored support to prevent knife crime is welcome in principle, as support and prevention is always better than harm and punishment. However, the NAYJ cautions against the mandatory nature of the intervention with severe criminal justice penalties: it is important that the line between help and punishment is not blurred – imposed support, at pain of punishment, can damage relationships and pull children further into the system rather than steer them away from it. Children often carry knives in the context of fear, exploitation, school exclusion and a lack of safe spaces in their communities. If this policy is not backed by proper investment in community services and prevention, it risks focusing narrowly on the child’s behaviour without tackling the wider conditions driving it. Given the existing racial and socioeconomic inequalities in policing and youth justice contact, the mandatory nature of the support tied to compliance could deepen those problems unless there is strong oversight and clear safeguards in place. Good practice for children in conflict with the law is developmentally informed, trauma-aware and rooted in relationships. The success of these proposals will depend far less on their mandatory status and far more on the quality, consistency and ethos of the support offered, and on whether youth justice services actually have the capacity and resources to deliver them properly.