

National Youth Justice Conference 2019

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This Info Sheet offers a summary of the key themes and messages emerging from the National Youth Justice Conference - 'Youth Justice Through the Ages'. Access the full resources and podcast [here](#).

Participation

The involvement of young people is always an important part of the conference, and this year was enhanced by inputs from several groups. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice, [Humza Yousaf](#) and the Minister for Children and Young People, [Maree Todd](#) addressed questions from young people via the newly formed CYCJ and [Staf Youth Just Us](#) participation group, on improving the Children's Hearing System, referencing [Our Hearings, Our Voices](#), "who are offering bold challenges to improve the Children's Hearing System". They also asked how the government is supporting young people with alcohol and substance misuse, to which Mr Yousaf responded "We should be working with people to rehabilitate them and not against."

James Frame and Rosie Moore were excellent co-chairs, and Kevin Lafferty gave an update on the progress of Youth Just Us. Delegates enjoyed screenings of *The Close*, performed by the young people of Kibble Education and Care Centre with support from Scottish Ballet, and MOTION, a play created with and performed by the young men of HMP & YOI Polmont.

Age of Criminal Responsibility

While the move to ACR of 12 is broadly welcomed, in recognition that UNCRC suggests a minimum tolerable standard, [Bruce Adamson](#), Children's and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland, continues to challenge and remind us that "there is never an excuse to go below an international minimum age of criminal responsibility". Maree Todd confirmed plans to establish an advisory group to review evidence and consider a further rise in the age of criminal responsibility. A Scottish Government participative workshop examined the challenges and opportunities that the reform will bring.

Children's rights

This was timely, with 2019 marking the 30th anniversary of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Bruce Adamson considered whether the public naming of children convicted of crime breaches their human rights of privacy and protection. "You will never punish a young person into a better way of being, you can only love and nurture them into a better way of being" said Maree Todd, highlighting the parallels between the UNCRC and GIRFEC. She also invited people to take part in the conversation around UNCRC incorporation by contributing to the [Scottish Government's Consultation](#) before August 14.

Improving outcomes for young people in custody

Wendy Sinclair-Gieben, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Scotland, presented on developments in HMP & YOI Polmont to promote wellbeing and how they are addressing the difficult area of suicide deaths in prison. She emphasised the importance of family and peer contact, stressing that one death is too many, even if Scotland has very low suicide rates compared to other

countries. Mr Yousaf referenced a pilot of in-cell phones across HMYOI Polmont, which he officially announced later on that same day during his [Response to the Expert Review of Mental Health Services for Young People Entering and in Custody at HMP and YOI Polmont](#). He also shared plans for a mental health strategy for young people in custody, the effect of remand, full body searches reviewed and improved feedback loops. Speaking about the work to create sentencing guidelines for children and young people, Lord Justice Clerk Lady Dorrian stressed how an appropriate sentence should increase likelihood of rehabilitation and reintegration and increase the connection with the community. And Cara Jardine and James Reilly's workshop considered that if relationships are the key to rehabilitation and reintegration, we must ensure that prisoners can keep connected and families are not punished further.

Alternatives to custody and diversion

"Why is any child deprived of their liberty in a detention setting? It is a fundamental breach of their human rights and needs to stop!" Bruce Adamson summed up the mood in the room - that custody for children should only ever be a very last resort.

'Divert! Divert! Divert!' exclaimed Crown Agent David Harvie in his lightning talk. Later that week he made a statement on decision making in cases of children jointly reported to the Procurator Fiscal and Children's Reporter. Martin Dorchester, CEO of Includem, gave a lightning talk on alternatives to custody, sharing an Includem case study to demonstrate the impact of working with and listening to young people. Community Justice Scotland's [Keith Gardner](#) described diversion as "smart justice - effective, efficient and meeting people's needs". There was a workshop on the North and South Lanarkshire Youth Justice Structured Deferred Sentence Service for 16-21 year olds, and CYCJ Associate [Dr Tim Bateman](#) (University of Bedfordshire) led a roundtable ahead of his conference talk on what England is doing to keep 16 and 17 year olds out of adult prisons.

Looked after children and secure care

Day 2 had a strong focus on secure care, with Professor Nancy Loucks and [Vonnie Sandlan](#) presenting on the work of the Care Review, and pointing out how young people aspire to a home of their own and love in their lives but also how young people in care are drawn into justice systems - creating a continuum between care and crime.

"Too many children are being criminalised" said Chief Inspector Lex Baillie, during his lightning talk on how Police Scotland are working with partners to reduce the criminalisation of children in care. CYCJ's Debbie Nolan and Ross Gibson gave respective lightning talks on Secure Care National Standards and the Secure Care Census. Ross highlighted the importance of talking about poverty as a basis for dealing with adversity and trauma, with reference to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Debbie pointed out that with two thirds of the 45 Standards being about the journey in and out of secure care, it's something we all have a stake in.

Inclusion as Prevention

"Let's talk about inclusion for young people at risk of offending due to inequality rather than "prevention"" said Fiona Dyer, CYCJ's Interim Director, introducing the conference. Mr Yousaf highlighted that 'early intervention can change life opportunities'; Fern Gillon's workshop introduced the [Inclusion as Prevention](#) project, re-shaping the design and delivery of preventative services with children and young people at risk of offending in South Lanarkshire.

Reintegration and transitions

"We all find our security in people and belonging." Professor Fergus McNeill told delegates about the [Distant Voices](#) project for people returning from prison, alongside songwriter [Donna Maciocia](#), who performed songs written by prisoners on family and belonging. This had strong parallels with the workshop on the Talking Hope project, supporting young people going through transitions.