



Children and Young People's
Centre for Justice

Reimagining Secure Care

Children and Young People's Participation

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Acknowledgments

The Reimagining Secure Care Team would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the project. In particular, we would like to thank the children and young people who generously shared their ideas, views, and experiences with us. Without their contribution this Participation report, and the Reimagining Secure Care project, wouldn't be possible. It is a testament to the strength and resilience of the children and young people involved in this report that they feel empowered to work towards change whilst they experience very challenging times in their own lives.

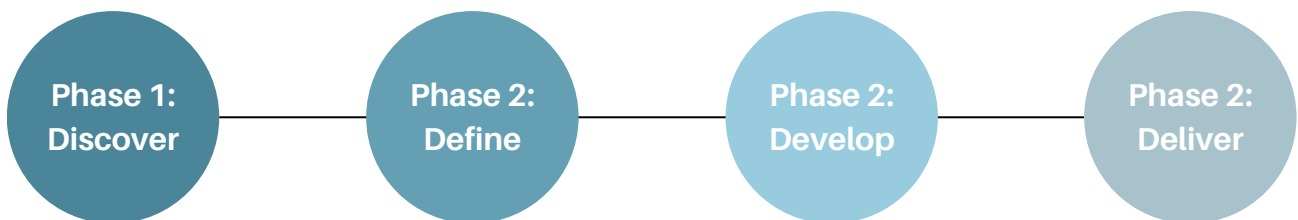
Introduction

The Children and Young People’s Centre for Justice (CYCJ) was commissioned by the Scottish Government in December 2022, to explore potential options and opportunities as to what a reimagined future should look and feel like for children and their families in Scotland across the continuum of secure care. These potential options and opportunities were to be explored to meet the needs and uphold the rights of children and young people across Scotland.

To achieve this, as well as recommendations of the Independent Care Review and support implementation of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, the Scottish Government identified the need to reimagine the continuum of secure care and develop credible options for alternatives.

In collaboration with Dartington Service Design Lab, CYCJ created a ‘project team’ that brought together the shared knowledge, expertise, and experience of all those involved to create a vision of effective, sustainable, trauma-informed provision for children who could be deprived of their liberty.

The project consisted of 4 phases in line with the Scottish Approach to Service Design (SAtdSD):



The project team worked in collaboration with children and young people in, and with experience of, secure care and/or Young Offenders Institutions (YOI), their families and carers, as well as all relevant stakeholders who contribute to supporting children and young people before, during, and after secure care, or throughout alternatives to secure care.

This report outlines and explores the views shared with the project team by children and young people with lived and living experiences of secure care and/or YOI.

These views were gathered through conversations throughout 2023 and early 2024, as part of Phases 2 and 3.

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The views of children and young people have been presented separately to allow for a more in-depth presentation of what was shared with us. Their views have been considered and influenced both the work undertaken with stakeholders and the full **Reimagining Secure Care report**, which provides further detail on the methodologies involved, as well as the opportunities that have been developed as a result of this project.

In addition to this report, the project team have developed an easy-to-read version to allow children and young people to better understand the views that have been shared with us, and to provide feedback to the children and young people who contributed to the project.

Developing Children and Young People's Sessions

Before organising the sessions, the project team met with a small group of children and young people with justice experience to hear their ideas of how we could facilitate conversation. We discussed various activities and creative approaches and were advised by them that often the best method for sharing views is through casual but supportive conversation. Based on their advice, we developed sessions with some visual prompts exploring different aspects of secure care and included some additional materials such as pens, fidget toys, and games.

Throughout the project, we had a total of **61 conversations** with children and young people. In some cases, we met with the same child several times throughout the project, due to them remaining in the same placement or moving to another centre, over the course of the project. The project team also worked alongside STARR, a participation group for people of all ages with experience of being in or on the edges of secure care, to review and reflect on what was heard from children and young people. We made every effort to include all of the views shared with us. We acknowledge that whilst we had conversations with 61 children and young people, we were unable to meet with every child in secure care during these sessions and as such we were unable to capture the full range of views across all 4 centres. Due to the pace of movement into and out of secure care, the views presented here are a snapshot of the experiences of some children in secure care at the time we met with them. We have attempted to present these views here fairly, and in line with good participation practice ensuring that as many views as possible are heard and have been able to influence the current piece of work.

Phase 2: Define

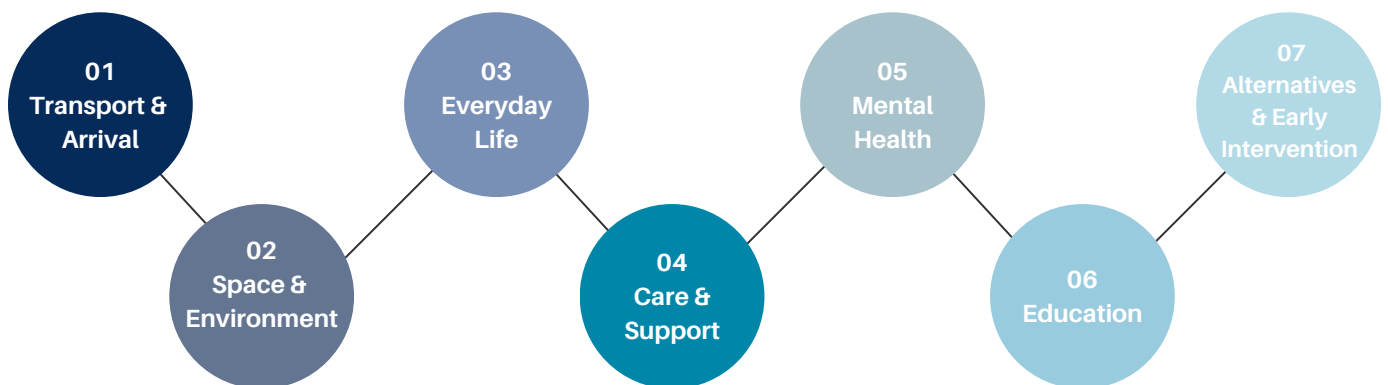
In Phase 2 we met with 30 children from four secure care centres and 4 young people from HMPYOI Polmont. From the sessions we facilitated it became evident that the children and young people we spoke with had rich ideas and observations about their time in secure care and/or Polmont. However, it was difficult to direct the conversation towards more 'abstract' concepts such as wider system change.

For example, when asked about what kind of support could be offered outwith secure care many of the children simply told us that if they were not in secure care they would be in HMPYOI Polmont instead.

We wanted to guide the conversation around these more abstract ideas. However, we were conscious of avoiding leading questions and also wanted to allow the children to use the space to share what they felt was important to them. We discussed this as a team and noted that it is quite onerous for a child or young person who is receiving 24/7 care in a secure environment to imagine an alternative.

Further to this, there are implications both in terms of ethics and of 'good participation' when it comes to drawing heavily from these children's experiences to affect system change that, most likely, will not be implemented in time for them to directly benefit from it. With this in mind, we have had many meaningful discussions with children about their current experiences and whilst they may not all fit directly with the design approach of the wider Reimagining Secure Care project they offer rich insight into the issues that matter to them whilst they are in a secure care setting.

From the Phase 2 sessions, we noted seven themes:



The findings from sessions have been arranged under seven themes or headings. Within each of these, we have included 'ideas for change' - these are recommendations and suggestions offered to address the issues raised with us by children and young people. As previously noted, much of the conversation focussed around time spent in secure care and/or YOI - as a result a number of these 'ideas for change' are focussed on practice within secure care. We would like to note, however, that responsibility for these changes lies not only with secure care practitioners - indeed, wider, holistic, cultural shifts are necessary to enable many of the changes suggested.

Transport and Arrival

Some of the children we met with shared their experiences of transport to secure care centres. Most noted that their experience of transport was negative and that they felt unprepared and uninformed. Some recalled spending several hours in a Police van during their journey to secure care, whilst others mentioned travelling with 'strangers' or travelling during the night and unaware of where in the country they were. In one case a girl told us that she had travelled to secure care with three men and felt uncomfortable with this.

To help with the arrival process it was suggested that there could be photographs of staff members with their names, to help children get to know who they would be supported by.

Ideas for change:

- A child's social worker or a worker they know and trust should always accompany them when entering secure care.
- Upon arrival at secure care, children should be introduced to key members of staff. Each housing unit should offer an information board with photos and names of staff members.

Space and Environment

A lot of the children we spoke to mentioned their physical environment. Almost everyone mentioned mattresses and discussed how uncomfortable they are, with some saying they prefer to sleep on the floor.

Lack of privacy in bedrooms was also mentioned with several children discussing that they felt uncomfortable without having a bathroom door and others saying that the screen over their shower didn't feel private. Others mentioned that they wanted a 'normal' bedroom, that they felt it was unfair to have to keep their clothes in a cupboard outside their room, and that even with the allowance they had to decorate their bedroom it still felt less than ideal.

We heard mixed feedback about recreational spaces. Children in centres with a pool and a gym said that they liked these, and they were pointed out as things that could improve the experience for those in centres that don't have them. Some children said that they wanted more outdoor space too.

Some children told us that they felt that the lack of privacy was difficult both in secure care and in their previous experiences of residential care. It was suggested that being trusted to be alone and enjoy 'peace and quiet' would help them with their emotions. They also suggested having rooms in each house with sensory objects such as coloured lights; it was felt that this would be a preferred place to spend time and help them feel more comfortable.

Ideas for change:

- Secure care centres should be supported to integrate more varied recreational spaces and resources, including outdoor 'green space' and sensory or quiet rooms which are designed alongside children to meet a range of needs and wishes.
- With appropriate risk assessment in place, children should be supported to create a bedroom which feels personal to them, and has adaptable access to storage space within their room when possible.
- Options for practical updates to bedrooms should be explored including alternative beds and mattresses, and additional privacy within bathrooms according to individually assessed risk of harm.

Everyday Life

Certain aspects of daily life were mentioned by several children. Older children that we spoke with told us that they felt it was unfair that they had to go to their bedrooms at the same time as the younger children, and suggested that older children could have a slightly later bedtime so that they could do more in the evening.

Some children suggested having more freedom to make phone calls in a way that was more easily accessible (eg. not having to wait until a phone was free, and not having a time limit on this). They suggested having mobile phones that could only call approved numbers. It was also suggested that they could use a Wi-Fi connection that was secure enough to be safe.

Food was often mentioned, with children telling us that they felt there weren't enough healthy options or enough choices. Two children also told us that they enjoyed being able to cook, and looked forward to days where they could choose and help cook dinner. Two of the young people we met with in Polmont had experience with secure care - both told us that they felt that food was a positive memory of secure care and that they missed having cooked breakfasts and takeaways once a week.

Ideas for change:

- Secure care centres should explore, with children, the possibility of introducing staggered bedtimes appropriate to the age range of the children in each house. This should also take into account the developmental stage and individual wishes of each child.
- Children should have access to safe methods of communication with family and friends at a time that suits them. This could include individual phones and further supervised access to online methods of communication.
- Children should be supported to prepare and cook a variety of foods and have access to a range of healthy meals which they can choose from. Whilst this is available at times, these opportunities could be widened according to individual children's wishes.

Care and Support

Many of the children we spoke to discussed the amount of focus that is placed on 'risk'. Within the context of secure care, this generally refers to a child's risk of harm to themselves or others (children or adults). Some mentioned that risk assessments are too generic and that they are unnecessary for people placed in secure care through the courts. They suggested having a more individualised risk assessment process which takes into account that people enter into secure care through different pathways. They felt that the chance of some people harming themselves was so minimal that they should be given more freedom in terms of their living space and bedrooms.

Similarly, children told us that night checks were too frequent (every 15 minutes) and that they shouldn't be the same frequency for those with very little risk of harming themselves.

On a similar note, we frequently heard views about the distinction between welfare and justice. Most of the children we met with told us that they felt there should be separate centres for different needs - some suggested a centre for those with welfare concerns and another for those on remand or sentenced. Some also thought that people who had been sentenced shouldn't be in secure care at all and that it should be solely for people on remand.

There were various reasons for wanting to keep people on different pathways into secure care separate: some felt that secure care felt like punishment so wasn't appropriate for people who had to be there for safety reasons relating to their mental health, whilst others felt that it was 'too soft' for children who had committed offences.

There was a strong sense, particularly amongst boys, that they 'deserved' to be in YOI as a result of their behaviour, and they told us that they would rather be in YOI than secure care because they felt like secure care doesn't promote desistance because it is 'kid jail'.

Within Polmont there was also a strong distinction between perceptions of those with mental health needs and those who conflicted with the law - this was described as "**crazies and criminals**". The young people we spoke with suggested that mental health care should be provided in a psychiatric hospital, not in secure care.

We heard that people struggled with nicotine withdrawals when they arrived. Some children felt that they should be able to vape or smoke, while others said they would like access to smoking cessation support. Some of the children we spoke to hadn't regularly smoked before entering secure care but felt that it was important to have nicotine replacement options for those who did. Similarly, several children mentioned the lack of support for drug and alcohol use and suggested that there should be a support program in place for this.

In terms of staffing, children told us that they wished for more consistency between staff teams especially during handover, as they found that different teams had different rules and issues often weren't communicated clearly across shifts.

Some children also suggested that secure care staff should be involved in Hearings, as they feel that they are the people who know them best.

Ideas for change:

- A consistent but individualised risk assessment process should be developed and implemented uniformly across centres, taking into account reasonable risk within the context of secure care.
- Staff teams within secure care centres should have consistent, aligned approaches to care. Individual staff teams should also communicate clearly and consistently with one another to ensure that children’s daily needs are heard and acted upon across shift handovers.
- Secure care centres should be supported to provide easy-access smoking/nicotine cessation for children of all ages.
- Children in, or on the edges of, secure care should be supported to access effective interventions for substance use. This should be offered in communities through appropriate statutory or third-sector services and be designed around the specific needs of children, taking into account their age and developmental stage. This should also be available within secure care to ensure equitable access to tailored support.
- Children should have the opportunity to discuss and learn about the principles of the care and justice systems in Scotland. Educational activities exploring issues such as children’s rights (including UNCRC), the Secure Care Pathway and Standards, and the Children’s Hearings System could help children develop informed opinions about the care they receive and their journey through secure care and/or the care and justice systems. It may be beneficial to children to explore concepts of stigma and labelling as part of the education offered within secure care, whilst taking into account their stage of development and how this might affect their understanding of the nuances of routes into secure care.

Mental Health

In addition to the views shared in the previous section, children in secure care shared with us that mental health problems and self-harm were significant issues within secure care. They felt that people who had mental health problems and struggled with self-harm shouldn’t be in secure care and that the environment made these problems significantly worse because you’re **“locked in with your feelings”**.

Some also shared that they found it difficult and distressing to see self-harm in secure care. In both secure care centres and YOI there was a consensus that being in secure care wasn’t an appropriate response to mental health needs. Further to this, many children shared that they had experienced long delays in accessing support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) whilst in secure care, with some noting that they had been living in secure care for around 12 months without any initial assessments from CAMHS.

Ideas for change:

- Children in secure care should be offered additional support to help them cope with exposure to distressed behaviour including self-injury or self-harm. This should be accessible to children regardless of the predominant reason for their admission to secure care.
- Secure care providers and those responsible for secure care criteria should consider the impact of children's exposure to a range of difficulties. This not only applies to exposure to distressed behaviour but also to the impact of children with complex mental health needs cohabiting with children deprived of their liberty as a result of conflict with the law. Whilst it is well-evidenced that these groups are not mutually exclusive, particularly within secure care, it must be noted that children tend to identify with one 'criteria group' and as a result may not be aware of the nuanced cross-overs between welfare and justice that practitioners may take for granted.

Education

Young people in Polmont told us that they had experienced difficulties with mainstream education, and pointed out the lack of support for issues such as dyslexia and ADHD. We also heard positive feedback about education within YOI – namely that it is more age-appropriate (education within secure care was described as 'babyish'), and that there are better opportunities for practical and vocational skills including driving theory classes. This was particularly important to the young people, and being able to pass their driving theory test before their return to the community appeared to be a common goal.

In secure care centres, we heard that some children felt school wasn't engaging enough. Children often told us that there should be more opportunities for training, further education, and employment. It was pointed out several times that children weren't engaged in education before coming to secure care so they shouldn't be expected to take an interest in it there, and that they should be able to pursue other interests such as gaining work experience and employment.

Ideas for change:

- Children should be offered inclusive and accessible opportunities to help them engage in education in secure care. These opportunities should include alternatives to standard curricula.
- All children in secure care should be fully supported to have equal access to age and stage-appropriate education and vocational training. Meaningful and fulfilling opportunities should be made available to those children who are not able to have mobility or move to campus-based spaces outwith the main secure care building.

Alternatives and Early Intervention

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, children in secure care centres found it more challenging to imagine alternatives to secure care or even equivalent support within the community. They told us that if it wasn't for secure care they'd be **"in a cell"** or would **"end up in Polmont"**.

Support in the community including youth work was discussed; many children said that they didn't feel connected to their community at all and that it was too easy for them to disengage from community support.

Engagement with social work support was also mentioned, with some telling us that support in the community doesn't work for some people and that they chose not to engage with social work which was seen as one of the reasons they entered secure care.

We heard a range of opinions about youth work – some felt that it was only helpful while you were actively involved in it whilst others said that it could help you to see **"another life"** and make different choices.

When discussing community intervention and alternatives to secure care, many of the children we met with said that they would rather be in Polmont because they felt there was more freedom there. When others pointed out that some people are in their cell for 23 hours a day in YOI, some said they'd still prefer it as they'd be able to have a phone and vape.

After some of these sessions, staff spoke to us about the circumstances of some of the children who had expressed these views; the care staff felt that the children who said they'd prefer YOI were generally preparing to transition to YOI and that they may be trying to reassure themselves about moving there. On reflection, there was also a sense that these children felt they deserved punitive measures and that being deprived of their liberty was something they had accepted as a result of their actions.

Within Polmont young people seemed to be more reflective of what could have helped them in the community, perhaps as they'd had more time and support to reflect on their experiences. They highlighted the importance of positive role models in the community and spoke about people with lived experience who had visited groups in Polmont. They discussed youth work opportunities in their communities and said that there weren't opportunities available to them when they needed them.

It was also pointed out that a lot of opportunities aren't free, and others require travel to other towns or schemes which would put them at risk. The young people felt that communities that needed more statutory or local authority support were **"deliberately underfunded"** as a means of **"keeping people down"** and perpetuating class divides.

Ideas for change:

- Children should continue to be supported to engage with the development of possible alternatives to deprivation of liberty and secure care. Opportunities to do this should offer children safe spaces to discuss their experiences of secure care, as well as the wider care and justice systems, and support them to explore issues such as stigma and over-criminalisation.
- Children and young people should be encouraged and supported to engage in conversation around empowerment and building hope – this could be facilitated alongside people with lived experience of secure care acting as positive role models.
- Local authorities should further invest in statutory and third-sector spaces that can act as safe community spaces for children and young people to spend time in. The development of these spaces must take into consideration issues such as geographical barriers (including the safety of children and young people across different local areas or schemes) and co-developed programmes of activities.

PHASE 3

In Phase 3 the project team met with 27 children from all 4 secure care centres.

Due to various issues including changes to staffing and youth work provision at Polmont, we were unable to meet with young people in YO1 in Phase 3. The sessions for Phase 3 were centred around the design briefs set out in the analysis of Phase 2 engagement with professionals, children and young people.

These design briefs are:

- Model of Care
- Preventing Deprivation of Liberty
- Mindsets and Culture

Where possible, the reflections shared with us have been grouped below under the design briefs.

Model of Care

All of the children we met with spoke highly of the staff, either as a whole or about individuals, and noted that most staff are kind and listen to them. One child we met with spoke about his feelings about not having any 1:1 time with staff, and needing more dedicated staff time. They reflected that they feel inclined to “kick-off” to gain more 1:1 time with staff. However, some children felt that some of the staff “don’t have skills” for working with children and as a result, the staff “get walked over”. They highlighted that staff weren’t required to gain care-related qualifications for the first five years of working in secure care, and felt that this didn’t help.

In terms of social work staff, children felt that their social workers didn't have time for them. Some children spoke about how difficult it was for them to contact their social worker from secure care. Others felt that their social workers were too forgiving of them, and it didn't 'stop them getting into trouble'.

There was also discussion of the transport and admission processes, with several children saying they felt lied to by social workers before transport to secure care. We discussed why their social workers might not have been honest, and the children reflected that they would probably have 'kicked off' if they'd been told the truth, but they still felt lied to and couldn't trust anyone. One child recalled being told by her social worker that she was going to sign a birthday card and take it to her brother but was instead driven to secure care. Some children told us that before coming into secure care, they found it difficult to get any support from social workers, in some cases this was despite being subject to things like Movement Restriction Conditions and Intensive Support and Monitoring Service (ISMS).

As stated earlier, employment and training opportunities came up several times as something that was missing from the care provided. It was suggested that there could be more vocational opportunities such as mechanics courses, or training in hairdressing which could allow the children there to work as hairdressers or barbers in the centre.

It was felt that these kinds of opportunities were especially important for those who weren't able to have mobility. Some children had heard they'd be able to work whilst in secure care and were disappointed when this wasn't possible. There was a sense of disappointment from some of the children who were on custodial sentences, as they didn't have the same access to opportunities that might benefit their education or employment experience.

Inequality of educational, vocational and employment opportunities as a result of different pathways into secure care must be addressed. Appropriate, proportionate risk assessment and management should be carried out as standard, and each child's level of risk assessed on an individual basis rather than restricting their activity by default due to their pathway into secure care. In doing so, the latter lies counter to Kilbrandon principles of destigmatisation and equitable care, and also risks infringement of children's rights under UNCRC (eg. Articles 28, 29, 39) and the Riyadh Guidelines (UN General Assembly, 1990). As clearly outlined within UNCRC, all children have the right to effective, accessible education that can serve to develop their individual interests, personality, and talents. This should include guidance regarding employment opportunities and vocational training. This must not be viewed as secondary to deprivation of liberty as a result of conflict with the law. It is well established within Scotland's youth justice policy and legislation that all children are deserving of the same rights regardless of their involvement with justice systems of any level.

Preventing Children from being Deprived of their Liberty

Generally, the children we spoke with said they weren't aware of any service or intervention that might have helped them before coming into secure care. Many said that they had no interest in things like youth work activities and weren't aware of any opportunities in their communities. Some children told us that the community spaces in their areas were 'broken down', with things like football pitches that couldn't be played on. Some children we spoke with told us that they had benefited from involvement in groups, this was generally groups relating to care experience for children who had been in care before secure care.

As with the previous phase, there was a sense that many children felt they were deserving of punishment and that a possible alternative to secure care wasn't something they'd considered: **"I knew what I was doing, I made the decision to do what I did."**

Despite internalised views that they were deserving of their current situation, there was also a fearfulness of YOIs which differed from what was heard in the previous phase. One person told us that they were very scared of the suicide rates in Polmont, telling us: "My close friend went in [to Polmont] and a few months later he was dead, he was only 20". In contrast to the discussion in Phase 2, children generally expressed that Polmont was very different to secure care, and was a 'prison'.

Mindsets and Culture

We discussed beliefs that others might have about secure care or children in secure care. We heard that many children felt that people around them viewed young people as 'trouble', and that **"nobody actually cares about young people"**.

Despite this, children told us they felt that staff, including teachers, in secure care were positive and **"actually listen to you"**.

Children shared with us that they were all aware of secure care before their coming in, and were familiar with it through friends or discussions with social workers. One person told us that before coming into secure care, they'd been told by a friend's social worker that if they went into secure care they would **"come out black and blue in a body bag"**.

We heard that before being in secure care, it was never viewed as a 'place of care', and some children recalled feeling fearful. There were a mix of experiences of coming into secure care – some children had been aware for several years that it might be an option for their care whilst others, generally children who had entered on a custodial sentence, felt unprepared.

In discussions about others' beliefs and mindsets, many children shared views and experiences of contact with the police. Many said they felt anxious around police and felt that **"police hate young people"**.

Some children had had campus cops in their school, but always avoided them. One child told us that he had been physically assaulted by police after an arrest which left him badly injured. He reflected that before being in secure care he would run away from police even if they were just passing by in the street as it made him so anxious after the assault.

Generally, children told us that they felt distrustful of police, and had no positive contact with them. Staff present in sessions suggested having positive police visits to secure care centres, similar to what is offered in schools, might help.

Amongst many of the children we spoke with there was a sense of hopelessness for the future. Many children told us that they didn't have any aspirations for the future, and many felt that it was inevitable that they come into conflict with the law.

When asked, most children we spoke with couldn't think of any goals they had for the future, and many hadn't considered what they might want to work towards after leaving secure care. This sense of hopelessness also extended to involvement in changes, with some children who had been involved in service development within centres, telling us that nothing had changed.

On a more positive note, we also met with several children who had become involved in social and political change whilst in secure care. In some cases, this was through involvement in participation opportunities within their secure care centre, whilst others were involved in things like attending parliamentary discussions in Scottish Parliament, and representing their peers through third-sector organisations like Who Cares? Scotland.

The experiences and views that the project team heard from children and young people were integrated into the co-design process. The co-design group consisted of representatives from health, Police Scotland, third-sector organisations, the Care Inspectorate, education, and speech and language practitioners.

Co-designed opportunities

Throughout the co-design process, the Participation and Policy Advisor working as part of the Reimagining Secure Care project team represented and advocated for the views of the children, young people, and parents involved in previous phases. By doing this, the project team ensured that children and young people were able to meaningfully influence the opportunities developed.

The opportunities are listed below, with links to how they may address the needs and wishes of children and young people outlined previously in this report.

Multidisciplinary Teams

- Children receive care that meets all of their needs.
- Children have contact with a link worker who helps ensure that their needs and wishes are centred throughout care planning.
- Children have opportunities to build trusting relationships with practitioners who understand who they are as individuals, and what might work for them.
- Strong multidisciplinary working reduces the need for children to repeat their experiences and views to multiple practitioners.
- Risk assessments are integrated across the multi-disciplinary team to ensure that all children receive individualised, holistic assessments that take into consideration their specific needs and risks, allowing them to receive care that doesn't limit their autonomy or lead to undue or disproportionate restrictions.

Community Hubs

- Children can access effective, holistic support in their community that can help address the risks and needs that might bring them to the edges of, or into, secure care.
- Through equitable access to community support children have opportunities to build trusting, positive relationships with a range of services including police.
- Children's individual needs, as well as the needs of communities, are identified and supported from an early stage.
- Through access to early stage, preventative support, children have a better understanding of and access to alternatives to secure care and the range of resources available to help them stay safe and minimise conflict with the law.
- Resources within community hubs can support children to develop hopes and aspirations for their future through things like education, training, and better psychological health.

Flex Secure

- Children who may require intensive support through deprivation of liberty can receive this in a flexible space which can adapt to their needs.
- Secure spaces can be tailored to suit children's interests through things like access to safe outdoor spaces and individualised recreational space within the 'flex secure' home.

- As children's needs and wishes develop and change, the flex secure space can adapt to ensure that moves are minimal. This may support children to feel that they have a safe, secure base with a familiar staff team.
- Smaller spaces with fewer children living together ensure that staff can meet individual needs effectively. This could ensure that children can receive dedicated support in a space that can be monitored effectively enough to allow for a more natural living environment with 'home-like' rooms, decor, and furniture.
- Secure spaces are embedded safely within communities to help children feel more connected to wider community spaces and to support more natural transitions out of secure care.
- With smaller secure spaces, children can have more frequent contact with family and friends.

Centering Lived Experience

Throughout the project, the team engaged with STARR to reflect on what we heard from children and young people currently experiencing secure care or YOI. STARR is a small group of young people and adults with past experience of secure care. The group in its current membership has over 6 years of experience of influencing policy and practice within secure care and the wider care and justice sectors. Their expertise comes not only from lived experience of secure care, but from significant involvement in the development of various changes to secure care practice including the Secure Care Pathway and Standards. As a key, influential group within secure care in Scotland, we consulted with members to enable them to share their reflections on what we heard during the sessions in secure care and YOI. STARR members noted that, despite their experiences of secure care taking place before several policy and practice developments such as the Independent Care Review and the introduction of the Secure Care Pathway and Standards, the views and experiences shared with the project team were largely reflective of their own experiences.

This points towards potentially uncomfortable truths about policy implementation and practice changes in a post-Promise Scotland; despite significant efforts to better uphold children's rights while they are deprived of their liberty, the lived experience of this remains largely unchanged from decades prior. Whilst this is undoubtedly difficult to hear, it perhaps highlights the need for children's and young people's experiences to be centred even more so than is currently being done. As is outlined in the Reimagining Secure Care Final Report, there have been significant improvements to secure care provision in recent years, enhancing the experience and effectiveness of the secure care journey. Not least of these is the effort that is consistently and visibly put into providing children in secure care with a place of safety, comfort, and stability.

We acknowledge that for many children secure care is an opportunity for them to receive the support they need, and for many it is a vital place of care, learning, and recovery. What this report points to however, are opportunities to enhance this further and ensure that all children at all stages of their secure care journey able to have their individual needs and rights met.

As mentioned previously, many of the children and young people the project team met with felt that whilst they were being listened to, the influence of their views on policy and practice changes was felt to be minimal at best. Within the wider field of care and justice policy and practice, we are sitting with a wealth of experience and knowledge shared with us by children, young people, and adults who have lived through these systems and have a passion for change. This has been evidenced across findings from Who Cares? Scotland (Barry, Moodie, Morrison and Cruickshank, 2008), CYCJ (Gough, 2017), The Independent Care Review, the development of the Secure Care Pathways and Standards, and in recent participation work facilitated by Who Cares? Scotland (Scottish Parliament, 2024).

Despite over 15 years of evidence demonstrating that children in secure care feel that change is needed to uphold their rights and fully meet their needs in secure care, the project team found that the everyday, lived experience of secure care remains largely unchanged from the perspective of children. We raise this issue not to detract from the significant and commendable progress that has been made in Scottish secure care provision.

What is clear, however, is that whilst progress has been made, particularly in the best interest of the child, the wider care and justice sector is falling short of truly embedding what children are consistently telling us they want to see changed.

As a community of practitioners, corporate parents and policymakers, we must empower children and young people to enact change, not only in light of UNCRC incorporation into Scots Law but as a moral imperative. The project team hopes that this evidence can be a call to action, one that reaches beyond the Reimagining Secure Care project, and motivates us not only to listen to children and young people but to fearlessly centre their experiences in the current and future changes to care and justice systems.

Next Steps

This report, alongside the full Reimagining Secure Care report, will be submitted to the Scottish Government. Following this, the Scottish Government will consider how each opportunity might be further developed and integrated into future changes to legislation, policy, and practice. Further reflection and discussion of the opportunities offered are available in the full. Reimagining Secure Care report.

Children and young people in secure care and YOI will be able to access the easy-to-read version of this report.

References

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