



HM Inspectorate
of Probation

The quality of services delivered to young adults in the Probation Service

An inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation
September 2024

Acknowledgements

This inspection was led by Maria Jerram supported by a team of inspectors and operations, research, communications and corporate staff. The manager responsible for this inspection programme is Helen Davies. We would like to thank all those who participated in any way in this inspection. Without their help and cooperation, the inspection would not have been possible. Please note that throughout the report the names in the practice examples have been changed to protect the individual's identity.

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ISBN: 978-1-916621-03-9

This publication is available for download at:

www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation

Published by:

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation
1st Floor Civil Justice Centre
1 Bridge Street West
Manchester
M3 3FX

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Foreword

Young adults in the criminal justice system face unique challenges, including higher rates of serious mental health conditions, neurodiversity and trauma compared to older individuals. Taking this into account and considering the most recent research evidence on maturation, it cannot be assumed that generic probation services will adequately meet their needs.

The Young Adults Policy Framework (2022), implemented by His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, correctly recognises the unique circumstances of young adults in the criminal justice system and the need for a more tailored, bespoke response. The framework sets out a desire for a holistic and trauma-informed approach to service delivery for young adults that fully considers their age, development, and maturity. While the framework is rightly ambitious, putting it into practice is proving challenging for the Probation Service.

Our inspection focused on young adults aged 18 to 21. Nearly half of the cases we inspected had significant past involvement with children's social care services. Disability and experiences of neglect and abuse were not unusual. Court orders, however, often started without all relevant information being received or analysed, affecting the quality of advice to court, assessments and plans. Information from youth justice services was rarely sought, despite many young adults on probation having previous involvement with them. These, in combination, make it less likely that young adults will receive the right interventions, succeed, and lead crime-free lives.

We met with many probation practitioners who were committed to and enthusiastic about working with this age group. They understood the importance of building positive working relationships to successfully engage them. Young adults, in turn, told us that the relationship with their worker was 'make or break' when it comes to making positive changes in their lives.

Staff and managers emphasised the complexity and demands of working with young adults. Overall, they had not received sufficient training to implement mandatory aspects of the framework, such as completing maturity assessments. The important questions are not always being asked and this undermines the quality of work delivered. Where resources have been made available, not all staff are aware of them or feel confident in using them. Overall, Commissioned Rehabilitative Services are underused and not always able to meet the distinct needs of young adults.

Although not widespread, we did note some creative initiatives and excellent examples of effective practice that focused on the maturity and development of young adults. The best examples of practice often involved working with specialist agencies and services such as those for children leaving care.

Implementing the framework in full will require closer alignment between policy goals and practice on the ground. Establishing a clear governance structure with accountability and defined roles is needed, along with stronger monitoring mechanisms to track progress and address shortfalls. Analysing referral, start, and completion rates for young adults would provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of current interventions and help with future commissioning. Doing the work well requires adequate staffing, training, and support.

Our recommendations, if implemented, are intended to improve the quality of work with young adults. Action will now need to be taken on these recommendations to successfully deliver on the ambitions of the Young Adults Policy Framework.



Martin Jones CBE
HM Chief Inspector of Probation
September 2024

Contextual facts

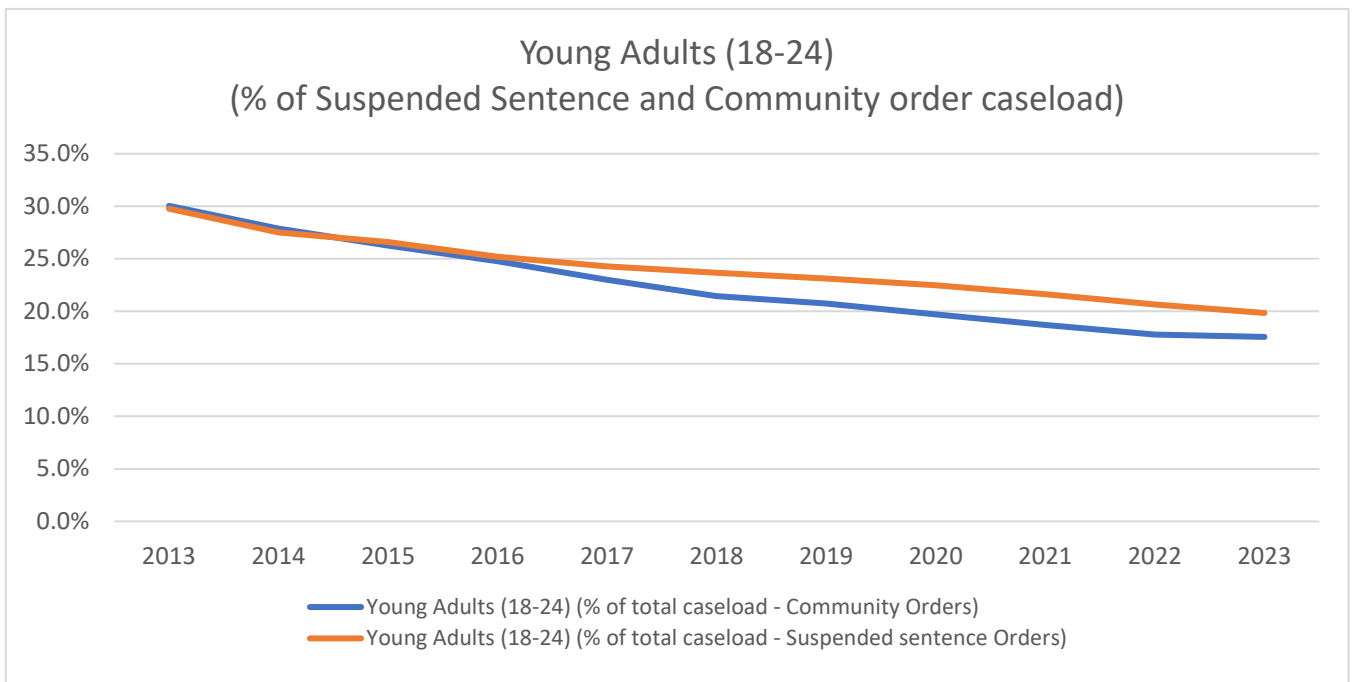
Young adults: key statistics

5,705,198	The number of people aged between 18 and 25 nationally. This equates to 9.6 per cent of the total population ¹
21,261	Number of young adults aged 18 to 24 on a community or suspended sentence order in December 2023. This represents 19.5 per cent of the total community or suspended sentence order caseload ²

Young adults and custody

3,090	The number of 18- to 20-year-olds in custody out of a total of 87,869 (3.5 per cent of the total) adults on 31 March 2024 ³
728	Number of 18- to 20-year-olds recalled to custody between January and December 2023. This equates to 2.8 per cent of the overall recall cases ⁴
Admissions to custody	Between January and December 2023, 5.1 per cent of the sentenced admissions to custody and 7.4 per cent of remand admissions to custody were people aged between 18 and 20 ⁵

Figure 1: Numbers of young adults starting a suspended sentence order or community order over the past decade, as a percentage of all cases starting such orders⁶



¹ UK Census 2021: Age by Single Year. Dataset TS007

² Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: October to December 2023: Probation 2023 (Table A6_16)

³ Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: October to December 2023: Prison Population 31 March 2024 (Table 1_Q_1)

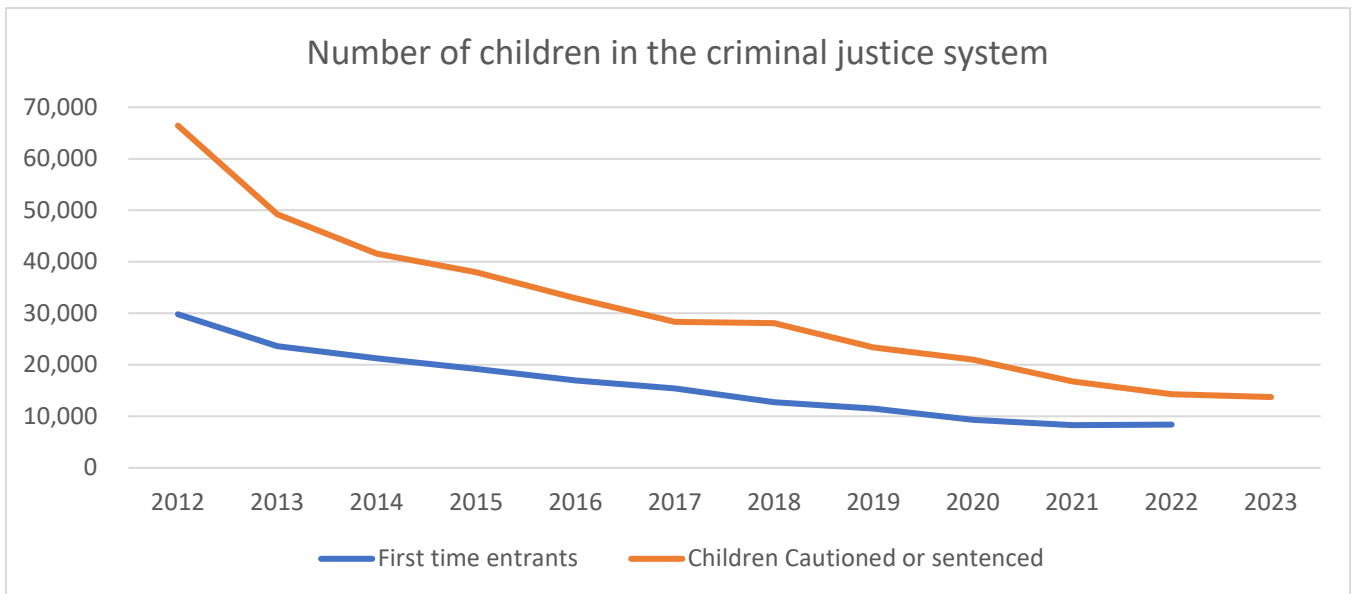
⁴ Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: October to December 2023: Prison Receptions: October to December 2023 (Table 2_Q_10)

⁵ Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: October to December 2023: Prison Receptions: October to December 2023 (Tables 2_Q_6 and 2_Q_8)

⁶ Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: October to December 2023: Probation 2023 (Table A6_4)

The declining number of young adults reflects a drop in the number of children in the criminal justice system, as shown below.

Figure 2: The reducing number of children involved with the youth justice system over the past decade⁷



Key findings from the inspection⁸

Was a maturity assessment completed to inform the court report?	Yes = 38%	
Was a sufficiently maturity-informed approach evident throughout assessment activity?	Yes = 30%	No = 42% Partially = 27%
Was a sufficiently maturity-informed approach evident throughout planning activity?	Yes = 29%	No = 39% Partially = 32%
Was a sufficiently maturity-informed approach evident throughout sentence delivery activity?	Yes = 36%	No = 31% Partially = 33%
Was a sufficiently maturity-informed approach evident throughout reviewing, considering the needs of the young adult and addressing offending behaviour?	Yes = 34%	No = 29% Partially = 37%
For young adults sentenced to unpaid work where low maturity was identified, were any actions taken by unpaid work staff to support engagement and compliance?	Yes = 12%	

⁷ Youth Justice Statistics: 2022 to 2023, CH2 First-time entrants to the youth justice system (Table 2.1), and CH3 Children cautioned or sentenced (Table 3.1)

⁸ Percentages may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding

Executive summary

Context

This inspection marks our first evaluation of services for young adults as a distinct group and focuses on the quality of work delivered by the Probation Service. Previous inspections of youth-to-adult transition work (HMI Probation 2012, 2016) highlighted significant deficits in the quality of work to transition individuals from youth justice services (YJS) to adult probation. Until recently, little attention was paid to the experiences of young adults supervised by probation, but this has shifted in recent years.

The Target Operating Model for probation services in England and Wales, and the Young Adults Probation Framework (HMPPS, 2022), set out what is required of probation practitioners when working with young adults aged 18 to 25. They demonstrate a growing emphasis on addressing the unique needs of this demographic. The framework acknowledges the most recent research on neurodevelopment and maturation, highlighting its significance in probation work and the adaptations needed in practice to ensure that provision for this group is inclusive and suitable.

Methodology

During the course of this inspection in January and March 2024, we examined the quality of work delivered by probation delivery units (PDUs) in Bury and Rochdale; Newham; Liverpool; Gloucestershire; Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland; and Hull and East Riding. Areas were selected primarily because of the numbers of young adults on their caseload.

We reviewed 115 cases of young adults aged 18 to 21 who were under community supervision and had been sentenced to or released from custody in the 12 months before our fieldwork. Additionally, we examined nine cases where young adults had transitioned from YJS to probation and assessed the quality of 73 court reports. We did not review YJS case files or inspect the quality of their transition work. We have not inspected or commented on the quality of work undertaken with young adults in custody.

We interviewed 78 case-holding probation practitioners, specialist staff, middle and senior managers, national young adult leads, and partner agencies. Additionally, we held meetings with senior leaders in the national HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) teams.

Before the fieldwork, we contacted the local YJSs to ask whether they had previously worked with the individual young adults and whether the young adults had previously had contact with children's social care services. We did this to assess the quality of information-sharing and to ascertain whether probation practitioners had considered the background experiences of the young adults.

We engaged the services of User Voice to conduct surveys and interviews with 259 young adults on our behalf, gathering their perspectives on the services they received from probation. A report from User Voice will be published alongside this report. We have incorporated their feedback into our key findings and used quotations that they gathered from young adults. We appreciate the valuable insights provided by the young adults.

Policy, strategy, governance and leadership

The commitment set out in the Young Adults Policy Framework, to address the unique needs of young adults by taking a distinct approach to the delivery of probation services for them, is credible. Putting this framework into practice, however, has been challenging for probation

services. When the framework was introduced, there was not enough understanding of or attention paid to identifying what was needed to make it work. As a result, while there are some pockets of good work being done, it is not widespread. To embed the framework into practice, improved governance structures with clear lines of accountability need to be established for delivering it, and sufficient resources allocated.

In our sample, only half of the cases with high levels of identified need benefited from Commissioned Rehabilitative Services. Of those referred, a third did not engage with the services. It was, however, good to see that some areas benefited from services co-commissioned with Police and Crime Commissioners, which were specifically tailored to young adults.

Some managers described barriers to accessing age-specific data, for example on referral, engagement and completion rates, but we were assured that this data is available. Data disaggregated by age group will offer valuable insights into the specific needs of young adults and help to identify and address any disparities in service delivery. Informed by this data, the next round of commissioning should now be used to attract specialist services designed to address the specific needs of young adults.

In every area we inspected there were established joint processes to support the transition from youth to adult services and these were well developed. Although the numbers have reduced in recent years, there is little information available to help understand this cohort of young adults, as recording processes make it difficult to extract the relevant data. It is therefore not possible to track any trends, increases or reductions in case numbers.

Staff and managers emphasised the complexity and demands of working with young adults. Overall, they had not received sufficient training to implement mandatory aspects of the framework, such as completing maturity assessments. Where resources had been made available, not all staff were aware of them or felt confident in using them. To embed the trauma-informed approach advocated in the framework, staff must be provided with the necessary resources, training, and support to do the work well.

Information-sharing, partnerships and services

To work effectively with young adults in a manner that is both maturity- and trauma-informed, staff must understand their life experiences. Given their age, the young adults' significant childhood experiences are especially relevant because, for many, they are recent events. To complete a timely court report or initial assessment, staff need to access all relevant information swiftly, emphasising the importance of effective information-sharing agreements and practices across agencies.

In almost half of the cases we inspected, the young adult had previous, and often significant, involvement with children's social care. We found that court orders frequently begin without all relevant information being received and/or analysed to inform the assessment and interventions. Information is rarely sought from YJSs, despite many young adults on probation having been previously involved with them. YJSs hold a wealth of information on the children they work with, and if probation staff were to access this, it would give them a better understanding of the young adult, their needs and their life experiences. This includes information on previous out-of-court disposals, which may not always appear on police records but could help explain any patterns of offending.

There are established processes for conducting domestic abuse enquiries with the police domestic abuse unit. This information exchange focuses primarily on situations where a person on probation has been a victim or perpetrator of domestic abuse. What is typically not considered is exposure to domestic abuse, which is a significant factor in the life experiences of many young adults on probation and which needs to be considered in relation to risk and safeguarding.

We noted some excellent examples of partnership working in practice, for example the work between probation services and leaving care teams to support young adults who are care-experienced. Working in partnership on these cases resulted in better quality assessment and

planning, often involving a coordinated approach to delivering interventions and improved access to services through shared resources.

Currently, there are no specific targeted approaches for young women, whose needs are often addressed based on gender, with limited attention paid to their maturity. To foster a more tailored approach to working with diverse groups, including those from minority ethnic backgrounds, practitioners need to increase their awareness of available third-sector providers who specialise in engaging young adults from different backgrounds.

Analysing referral, start, and completion rates for young adults would provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of groupwork programmes and unpaid work (UPW). UPW needs specific attention due to its higher use for young adults and reported challenges related to engagement and completion.

Quality of court reports and case supervision

During our consultation with young adults, they told us that their relationship with probation practitioners is critical in helping them engage with probation services, access interventions and support, and complete their sentences. For them, it's often 'make or break'. The focus on building meaningful relationships was a strength in much of the casework we inspected. Practitioners genuinely want the best for young adults, and they are motivated to work with them. However, they need to do more to ensure that young adults' needs are understood and met, that their safety and wellbeing are prioritised, and that, where risk issues have been identified, other people are kept safe.

Not all young adults who would have benefited from a court report had received one. Where maturity assessments had been completed, they were not consistently informing sentencing proposals. Overall, reports lacked sufficient detail to assist the court in reaching the most appropriate sentencing decision that is both achievable for the young adult and likely to address the identified concerns and reduce any risk. To be meaningful, this information must be analysed in the context of the young adult's assessed level of maturity.

While we noted examples of good practice, the gaps in information and in practitioners' understanding about the significance of maturity and development had an impact on the quality of most aspects of the work. Improvements are required if the ambition to work differently with young adults, particularly those assessed as having lower levels of maturity, is to be achieved. The quality of services delivered to young adults in custody requires particular attention. This group often face the most challenges. They are vulnerable, and are often assessed as posing a more significant risk to others. Getting it right at the point of release from custody is critical if they are to succeed in the community.

In all aspects of work, there needs to be a focus on young adults' diversity needs, whether age is their only presenting protected characteristic for consideration or whether they present with multiple complex and diverse needs. This requires a thoughtful and considered approach. Practitioners should be equipped to discuss experiences of discrimination with young adults and offer support where it is required. A more creative approach could be supported by specialist external services. High numbers of those sentenced as adults have extensive involvement with YJS and children's services and the small number of cases inspected showed that young people need to be better prepared for the move to adult services.

Recommendations

HM Prison and Probation Service should:

1. develop and resource a national strategy for service delivery to young adults that sets out the key priorities, governance structure and measures to track progress
2. relaunch the Young Adults Policy Framework with clear guidance for staff, including on information-sharing with partner agencies and how they balance their probation duties with adopting a trauma-informed approach
3. establish an age-specific data set to assess young adults' needs, and to identify and address gaps in service provision and any disparity in outcomes
4. evaluate, assess, and consider the suitability of current offending behaviour programmes for young adults as a distinct group and use this analysis to develop the next generation of programmes
5. assess the use of unpaid work for young adults to ensure that it is well targeted and achieves positive outcomes
6. incorporate minimum standards for services for young adults into new commissioning contracts, and ensure that staff are equipped to work with this cohort
7. ensure access to services and support is equitable for all young adults with protected characteristics and make sure that addressing diversity, particularly in relation to race and ethnicity, is prioritised
8. continue to develop learning programmes that enable staff to assess maturity, adopt a trauma-informed approach and discuss discrimination and its impact with young adults
9. ensure that any barriers to staff requesting or accessing information from partner agencies, including youth justice services are addressed
10. improve the quality of pre-sentence reports for young adults, ensuring that maturity is fully assessed and reflected in the proposal to Court.

Regional probation directors and Probation Delivery Unit heads should:

11. provide focused, reflective support for staff to support the goals and practices of a more trauma-informed approach to working with young adults.

1. Introduction

1.1. Why this thematic?

Over the past eight years, there has been significant research highlighting the psychosocial maturity, brain development, and evolving social context of young adults. However, the evidence specific to understanding young adults within the criminal justice system is less robust. Existing research tends to be limited in scale, often relying on interviews and focus groups with individuals, rather than rigorous evaluations that measure how well interventions meet young adults' specific needs, to promote their desistance and manage risk.

This inspection is the first thematic review of services for young adults under probation supervision. Its main aims are to gather valuable insights into the experiences of young adults within the criminal justice system and assess whether the services they receive adequately meet their specific needs, address risk factors, and align with current research findings.

This inspection provides an opportunity to identify the strengths, areas for improvement, and potential gaps in the implementation of His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)'s Young Adults Policy Framework. It is hoped that the findings from this inspection will inform the ongoing development and improvement of services for young adults under probation supervision.

1.2. Background

In 2016, the Justice Committee published a report entitled '*The treatment of young adults in the criminal justice system*'. The report presented the argument that 'there is a strong case for a distinct approach to the treatment of young adults in the criminal justice system' (Justice Committee, 2016). It set out an approach to working with young adults. The government at that time rejected most of the suggestions, and the Justice Committee released a follow-up report, *Young adults in the criminal justice system* (Justice Committee, 2018).

The two Justice Committee reports set out the following:

- Research strongly supports the view that young adults, particularly young men, are a unique group, distinct from children under 18 and adults older than 25, and there is a compelling case for adopting a distinct approach to and making additional investments in this cohort.
- Existing policy and operational arrangements were unsatisfactory, as they failed to take account of the distinct needs of young adults and there was no clearly defined strategy.
- The Ministry of Justice's commitment to developing a maturity assessment was welcomed, but there was no routine screening and limited action was taken to treat young adults appropriately in accordance with the development needs identified.
- There was limited evidence of which interventions worked effectively; most focused on managing risk rather than positively helping young people to progress to maturity as the brain fully develops up to the mid-20s.

Education, training and employment

Employment is a critical issue for young adults, not only for the positive financial impact it can have or to occupy their time, but also as a pathway out of offending and towards a non-offending identity (T2A, 2013). Research indicates that young adults (aged 18 to 20) in custody consider securing employment to be more important as a factor in desisting from offending than older adults do. They are also more likely to express a need for assistance to improve their education (MoJ, 2015).

Moreover, young adults in custody often have fewer or no qualifications compared with older prisoners, and they frequently face significant challenges in their schooling history, such as truancy, exclusion, and permanent expulsion (Ministry of Justice, 2015). These educational disadvantages can contribute to their vulnerability and are why it is so important to provide effective interventions that improve education and employment opportunities to support desistance from offending behaviours.

Equality legislation

The Public Sector Equality Duty is imposed on all UK public bodies by section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. It means that public bodies have to consider equalities when exercising any of their functions and taking decisions. The law protects people, not only from direct discrimination but also from indirect discrimination. This is where a policy or practice is applied equally to everyone but has a disproportionate negative effect on people who share a protected characteristic, such as age or race.

Black and minority ethnic young adults

In his 2017 review, David Lammy highlighted a concerning trend: while the overall number of young people in the youth justice system has declined over a decade, the proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals in the system has increased. Lammy warned that these young people will move into the adult justice system, potentially leading to a disproportionate number of them within the adult probation service (Lammy Review, 2017). Additionally, Black and minority ethnic children are disproportionately represented in the care system.

We carried out a thematic inspection of race equality in probation in 2021 and revisited the subject in 2023 (HMI Probation 2021, 2023). The Chief Inspector of Probation stated: "It is clear that race equality – for people on probation and probation staff – remains a work in progress. While there is a commitment to improve the experience of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people within this area of criminal justice, there is still some way to go to achieve proper equality of provision and opportunity."

Legislation and guidance

In 2015, HMPPS (then the National Offender Management Service) published a set of evidence-informed commissioning principles, *Achieving Better Outcomes for Young Adult Men*. This summarised the data and evidence on young adults in prisons and probation.

Better Outcomes for Women Offenders (2015) set out the commissioning principles for female offenders and this was built upon in the Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022-2025. Both make little reference to young women.

In 2020 the Probation Reform programme, which was supporting the process of reunification of the probation service, included a workstream on services for young adults. This included developing a policy framework to support work with young adults.

The Target Operating Model for probation services in England and Wales was published in February 2021. It stated that probation staff would require the right skills to work with young adults, in order to support practice that promotes young adults' engagement. Training would equip staff to understand maturity, brain development, and adverse childhood experiences.

The Young Adults Policy Framework, published by HMPPS in February 2022, establishes the guidelines and expectations for probation practitioners who work with young adults aged 18 to 25. This framework includes mandatory requirements, such as conducting maturity assessments to inform all aspects of this work, and provides additional resources to support probation practitioners to deliver the work.

Youth to adult transition work

At the age of 18, individuals are legally considered adults. This means services tailored for children are withdrawn from them and are often replaced by adult services that address similar needs. In the criminal justice system, cases are transferred from YJSs to adult probation services, although there is flexibility for some cases to be retained by a YJS if this is deemed appropriate. Even if a case is retained by a YJS for valid reasons, it may be transferred if a young adult reoffends and is re-sentenced to adult services. The number of cases transferred to probation from a YJS has reduced substantially in recent years. This may be because of the sharp reduction in the number of children subject to statutory supervision. As a result, most young adults supervised by probation services have been sentenced as adults.

Joint national protocol for transitions

The joint national protocol for transitions in England, *Joint protocol for managing the cases of children moving from Youth Offending Teams to the Probation Service*, was updated in 2021. The guidance for Wales was updated in 2020. The protocols were developed and agreed by the Youth Justice Board, the Probation Service, and youth offending team manager groups in England and Wales. They set out the procedures for transferring cases where the young adult is in custody at the point of transfer.

1.3. Aims and objectives

In this inspection we aimed to answer the following questions:

- Do the governance and leadership arrangements support and promote the delivery of high-quality, personalised, and responsive services for young adults?
- Are staff within the service empowered to deliver high-quality, personalised, and responsive services that meet the needs of young adults?
- Is a comprehensive range of high-quality services in place, enabling personalised and responsive provision to meet the needs of young adults?
- Is timely and relevant information available and appropriate facilities in place to support a high-quality, personalised, and responsive approach for young adults?
- Is the pre-sentence information and advice provided to court sufficiently analytical and personalised, taking into account age and maturity, and supporting fair and objective decision-making?
- Does service delivery focus sufficiently on maturity in order to engage young adults, support their desistance and manage risk?

1.4. Report outline

Chapter	Content
2. Policy, strategy, governance, and leadership	This chapter considers the national leadership and governance arrangements for work with young adults within the Probation Service. It describes how work with young adults has developed nationally, regionally and in PDUs, within the context of the Target Operating Model and Young Adults Policy Framework. Finally, it reports on training, skills and support arrangements for probation staff working with young adults.
3. Information-sharing, interventions, and services	This chapter examines the effectiveness of information-sharing arrangements to inform and support the work delivered to young adults under probation supervision. It assesses the suitability of interventions and the provision of services to young adults. Lastly, it discusses the effectiveness of partnership work in supporting the delivery of high-quality services that meet the needs of young adults.
4. Quality of reports and case supervision	This chapter reports on the quality of work undertaken with young adults. It examines the practitioners' understanding of maturity, and how it is assessed and accounted for at the point of sentence and throughout the period of supervision. The chapter also evaluates how well the Young Adults Policy Framework is being applied in practice and comments on YJS to adult probation transition work.

2. Policy, strategy, governance, and leadership

This chapter considers the national leadership and governance arrangements for work with young adults within the Probation Service. It describes how work with young adults has developed nationally, regionally and in probation delivery units (PDUs), in the context of the Target Operating Model (TOM) and Young Adults Policy Framework. Finally, it reports on training, skills and support arrangements for probation staff working with young adults.

2.1. National leadership

Policymakers in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), along with senior probation leaders, acknowledge the importance of adopting distinct approaches for young adults, as set out in the TOM and in the Young Adults Policy Framework. The aim is to make probation services for young adults more effective and appropriate, by addressing their unique needs and circumstances.

HMPPS policy

The HMPPS policy team developed and disseminated the Young Adults Policy Framework across probation regions in 2022. This followed the unification of the Probation Service in June 2021. During this transition period, regions faced significant challenges in maintaining normal operations, and managing substantial staffing gaps. The framework was not supported by a clear national strategy or centrally commissioned training to help staff to adapt their practice in line with the policy. Limited practice guidance was provided and there has been little follow-up on its progress and impact.

The policy framework is intended to bring together relevant requirements and guidance to improve the management of young adults and meet their particular needs. It is assumed that it will not make any additional demands on resources. Under the terms of the policy, HMPPS has 'a corporate audit programme that will audit against mandatory requirements to an extent and frequency determined through the appropriate governance.'

Regions are expected to develop delivery plans to implement the policy at a local level, to ensure that services across the country are taking a tailored approach to working with young adults, as set out in the policy, and to drive consistent practice.

Our inspection findings suggest that HMPPS has underestimated the resources required to fully integrate the Young Adults Policy Framework. Notably, there is a need for focused staff training on maturity assessments and trauma-informed practice, which are essential components of the framework.

Many of those interviewed during our inspection raised the comparison between working with young adults and working with women in a way that responds to their unique and often complex needs. Substantial efforts have been made to embed a distinct strategy for women, with a central team leading the work and additional resources allocated to support it (HMI Probation, 2024). There have been improvements in the data collected and quality of work delivered to women under this structure. This has prompted calls for a similar approach to be adopted for young adults, to ensure consistent and effective services.

Young adults with care experience

HMPPS has an established strategy in place for individuals with care experience, and in March 2023 released its guide *Care experience matters*. This guide emphasises the importance of cooperation between prisons, probation, and local authorities to support care-experienced individuals effectively within the criminal justice system. It promotes a partnership approach for this group of young adults, who are over-represented in the criminal justice system. In our inspection we noted the

focus on understanding the background, vulnerabilities and needs of care-experienced young adults. The legislative framework for young adults leaving care and their entitlement to local authority support until the age of 25 meant that in most cases they were receiving support from a personal adviser. A collaborative approach between probation staff and personal advisers improved the quality of assessment, planning and service delivery, which were significantly stronger for young adults with care experience when compared with all other young adults in our sample.

Transition protocol

The transition protocol sets out the respective operational procedures and responsibilities for transferring cases effectively from youth justice services (YJSs) to the Probation Service. Both organisations are responsible for ensuring a smooth transition process and should hold a review meeting involving the young adult four to six weeks after formal transfer.

In every area we inspected, this protocol had been used to establish local joint processes to support transition work, and these were well developed. There are no published or easily available statistics to understand the cohort of young adults who transition between the youth and adult system, as information-recording processes make it difficult to extract the relevant data. It is therefore not possible to track any trends, increases or reductions in case numbers.

Implementation

The head of young adults strategy at HMPPS is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Young Adults Policy Framework, as well as related policy areas, such as the strategy for care-experienced people and probation secondments in YJSs.

A regional probation director (RPD) has been designated national lead for young adults in the Probation Service. The lead chairs quarterly meetings attended by PDU regional young adult leads. This provides an opportunity to share information and promote learning. The meetings are well attended by representatives from each region; attendance also includes officials from the MoJ's Youth Justice Policy Unit and representatives from the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales.

During meetings, attendees are encouraged to consider how the TOM is being implemented in their regions and whether service delivery is aligning with the Young Adults Policy Framework. They are also invited to share any concerns or challenges in delivering services to young adults. This promotes collaboration and problem-solving across regions. Attendees report that this has given them a better awareness and understanding of work with young adults. The PDU regional young adult leads are responsible for cascading information and learning within their region.

The young adult national lead provides updates to the chief probation officer. This ensures that relevant information and developments concerning young adults are communicated to the senior leadership team.

While the meeting structure involving regional representatives has its benefits, it lacks the capacity to fully scrutinise, analyse, and challenge regions on the quality of their work with young adults. The national lead for young adults, along with their responsibilities as an RPD, cannot commit sufficient time to coordinate the necessary oversight, due to the demanding nature of their role.

2.2. Commissioning arrangements

The current Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) arrangements have been in place since June 2021. When providers agreed to the contracts, they had to commit to delivering tailored services to individuals on probation, including young adults. However, these contracts are broad and do not specifically identify or highlight how tailored services should be delivered to young adults, and they do not specify any minimum expectations for this cohort. This ambiguity in the contracts makes it difficult for contract managers to hold providers to account. This is exacerbated by a lack of available data to support any challenge to the effectiveness of provision.

Feedback from staff, managers and commissioners in most areas we visited indicated that there was little difference in the services delivered to young adults compared with the services provided to others. There is no standard guidance, monitoring or evaluation to ensure that CRS provision is maturity and trauma-informed or sufficient to meet young adults' specific needs.

Under current arrangements, probation practitioners are responsible for assessing young adults' needs and communicating these to the service provider when they are working with young adults. We found that referrals made to CRS did not consistently include necessary and important information on low maturity, risk and safeguarding concerns. Unfortunately, the services themselves do not typically have staff who are skilled and experienced at working with young adults and identifying their needs.

In our sample, only half of cases benefited from CRS provision, despite having high levels of identified need. For those who were referred, a third did not engage with the services. Young adults told User Voice that it was important that services were tailored to their specific needs. One young adult described the benefits they experienced from receiving specialised support:

"I have had mental health support, grief support/counselling and addiction support and I think all of those are probably the most important things to keep me from coming back here."

In every area we visited, staff raised concerns about the recent cessation of CRS education, training and employment (ETE) provision due to budget constraints. ETE support is accessed by young adults more than any other group, and engagement in employment or training is critical to reducing the risk of future offending. PDUs must find alternative ways of helping individuals to access ETE support, such as through Department for Work and Pensions services. However, most staff did not consider this to be an appropriate approach, as the support offered is limited. Current CRS contracts end in March 2025, with an option to extend for an additional 12 months. This offers an opportunity to build some minimum expectations for working with young adults into the new contractual requirements. Incorporating clear and explicit expectations into the contracts would help to ensure that support for young adults is better tailored to their needs. Additionally, it would empower regional contract managers to hold providers to account.

Regional Outcomes and Innovation Fund and co-commissioning arrangements

The Regional Outcomes and Innovation Fund (ROIF) enables regions to grant-fund further activities that can address service gaps and encourage engagement, desistance and rehabilitation, while also building knowledge of which activities work best. This should give PDU leaders the autonomy and capacity to identify gaps in the services available for young adults and to commission services locally.

However, the funding available has been significantly scaled back. In one area, the ROIF budget had decreased from £1.3 million to £500,000 over recent years. During our inspection, the grant figure for the 2024/2025 tax year for that PDU was still unknown. This uncertainty left the service unable to guarantee that it will be able to meet financial commitments to ongoing projects. Additionally, planned co-commissioning work aimed at addressing housing issues for young adults accessing accommodation through the CRS provider had to be shelved due to financial uncertainty.

Procuring even a relatively small specification contract can be a long process, involving extensive documentation. We saw projects that had still not been put in place 18 months after the process started.

In some areas young adults benefited from co-commissioned services with Police and Crime Commissioners as part of the local serious violence reduction strategy:

Good practice examples

The Phoenix programme in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland is funded through the violence reduction network. The programme is delivered by a multi-agency team and is designed to address serious violence and reduce harm. In an example of good practice, a young adult in our sample was allocated a 'community navigator', who had experience of the criminal justice system themselves. The community navigator worked closely with the probation practitioner and the young adult to develop and implement a focused intervention that was having a positive impact on the young adult's life. The probation practitioner highlighted how much the young adult appreciated the support of someone who had first-hand experience of the probation system as a young adult and had successfully moved forward in their own life.

In Greater Manchester, the violence reduction unit has partnered with the relationships charity TLC: Talk, Listen, Change. They have launched a mentoring programme aimed at supporting men on probation to become positive role models within their families. The programme, called Stepping Up, focuses on helping men aged 18 to 25 who are involved in the criminal justice system to rebuild strained family relationships.

2.3. Regional and PDU leadership

Young adults were identified as a priority in almost every area we visited. The regional vision for service delivery aligned with the national policy framework and its implementation. Leaders were unanimous in the view that young adults presented with complex and unique needs and that more needed to be done to promote a tailored approach to working with them. There was a strong sense of commitment to achieving this.

However, in most areas the strategic direction is not yet fully established. Most had not carried out a needs assessment to identify the specific challenges and issues facing young adults, including an analysis of demographic trends, risk factors, service gaps and existing resources. Some described barriers to accessing age-specific data, for example on referral, engagement and completion rates, but we were assured by performance and quality national leads that this data is available if it is specifically requested. Quality assurance work conducted nationally has identified that the maturity assessment tool is not being used effectively. Most regions were yet to undertake quality assurance work that was specific to young adults.

In all areas, specialist concentrator teams were planned to provide a more tailored approach to the services delivered to young adults. None were fully established at the time of our inspection, but the foundations had been laid in all areas. Of the cases we inspected, only 22 per cent were supervised by young adult specialist workers. Challenges including high caseloads and staff recruitment, retention and sickness have delayed progress. This has led to frustration among managers and staff, who are eager to begin their new roles.

The regional PDU heads with thematic leads for young adults are tasked with sharing and promoting best practice. Some regional leads hold forums attended by senior probation officers (SPOs) and practitioners who work with young adults. This practice was not consistent across every area, and where it occurred, it did not always have a significant impact on the service's work. We noted the limited time available to most young adult leads to focus on coordinating regional developments, because of the demands of their full-time roles.

The key ingredients for effective work with young adults are demonstrated in the following example of good practice:

Good practice example

In Hull and East Riding, the PDU head and the regional young adult lead demonstrated a strong and shared vision for young adults. This was reflected in a regional delivery plan. The leadership team played an influential role, collaborating effectively with partners such as health to improve young adults' access to services that met their identified needs. The senior probation officer (SPO), with the young adult thematic lead, had extensive experience in youth justice, and was highly regarded by staff as a valuable source of learning. A quality delivery officer was given specific responsibility for work related to young adults. The PDU was using an established data set broken down by age, enabling staff to scrutinise service delivery for young adults and identify themes and trends in the cohort.

Staff, including court report writers, were clear about their roles and expectations in relation to the overall vision, and felt empowered to work differently with young adults. For most, the demands of working with young adults had been taken into account in their workload. The impact of strong leadership was evident in the overall quality of casework and the progress made in implementing a maturity-informed approach to working with young adults.

The role of the SPO

In each PDU, an SPO held a thematic lead role for young adults, although the expectations of this role varied depending on the arrangements within the PDU or region. The SPO leads served as the main point of contact for all staff who had queries about practice with young adults. Overall, this arrangement worked well. Most of these leads were in place and waiting for the specialist teams to be fully developed, at which point they would have the bulk of all young adults' cases sitting directly under their line management.

Part of the SPO lead role was to be the direct link to YJSs to jointly oversee transitions and the work of the seconded probation practitioner. This involved regular meetings between youth justice management and SPOs to consider cases eligible for transfer. YJSs overall reported positively on the working arrangements.

Most staff felt supported by their SPO, but their capacity to develop practice in relation to young adults was limited. Some were so busy that they could only deal with core tasks and had limited time for reflective supervision. We found management oversight to be effective in less than a third of cases, with little attention paid to relevant issues of maturity.

One SPO lead told us:

"It is constant crisis management, service users in crisis because there are no services available, probation practitioners are in crisis because they are newly qualified, and the context is dire and then managers are in crisis trying to support staff and oversee more cases and they are in crisis as well."

2.4. Equipping staff to work with young adults

Staff workload

The probation prioritisation framework adjusts practice expectations to manage workload demand. Four of the regions we inspected were classified as 'green' according to the framework, while two had recently transitioned from 'red' to 'amber'. Despite this positive shift, and regardless of prioritisation status, over half of the case-holding staff reported difficulties in managing their workload.

In relation to workload and demand, staff said there was a need to invest significantly more time in establishing trusting relationships with young adults before meaningful work can be accomplished,

in contrast to working with other adults on probation. However, the current workload measurement tool does not adequately account for the complexity of this work.

One case manager expressed a view on the complexity of the work that was consistent throughout our inspection:

“The profile and needs are higher, emotional management, learning needs are greater. It can be much harder for them to control their temper as they don’t have those skills. They would struggle in a group setting as they have struggled at school. They have meltdowns and they are chaotic. You don’t get any reduction in cases for the demands. We have a young adult team but there is no recognition higher up of these needs, which makes it hard to understand why there is a specialist team.”

We found that lower or protected caseloads alone did not necessarily result in more effective work. However, in the region where practice was strongest, the majority of staff had a caseload of less than 110 per cent, according to the workload management tool. This was significantly lower than in most other areas.

Training and development of case responsible probation practitioners

On average, only a third of staff felt that they had received sufficient training and development to work effectively with young adults. This percentage varied across different areas: in some regions, no staff members felt adequately trained, while in another, every staff member reported that they had received sufficient training. There was no noted correlation between the perception of staff about the quality of training they received and our observations about the effectiveness of practice.

One practitioner told us about their concerns regarding the level of training they had received:

“We have had no training: we have just had to just wing it. I have learned a lot this week such as the fact that Choices and Changes exists. Training is a gap, and someone somewhere needs to be looking at specific training for those working with this group of people because they are very complex.”

Many managers also identified that they need training in order to support practitioners working with young adults. While briefings and training resources were available through Equip, many staff told us they had no time to fully explore them. Most of the training available was online learning. Staff were expected to access this when they could, and few were given sufficient protected learning time to do so. Most staff would highly value face-to-face training sessions instead of online training. For many, the online approach is not their preferred learning style. Also, the individual learning approach makes it difficult to embed consistent practice across services and regions.

We noted that the work of the probation officers was of higher quality than that of probation services officers (PSOs) across almost all areas of practice, including the adoption of a maturity-informed approach. This could be because working in a trauma-informed, maturity-informed way depends heavily on relationship-building. This is more achievable with fewer cases, despite their complexity, and probation officers’ workloads tended to be spread across fewer cases than PSOs’ workloads. Probation officers were also more likely to have benefited from some training in this area.

In every inspected area, a probation practitioner was seconded to the local YJS. This gave them access to YJS training such as trauma-informed practice, which they valued. In Bury and Rochdale, there is a plan for all young adult specialist staff to spend time in the YJS to learn about the approach taken to working with individuals up to the age of 18. This initiative is a positive step towards developing the skills of the specialist team and exemplifies the value of harnessing learning from partner services. Exploring learning opportunities across local partnerships could significantly benefit probation staff development.

In Newham, staff in the young adult team have benefited from a comprehensive learning and development package that addresses issues relating to maturity and development. The package

includes training in trauma-informed practice, cultural competency, working with families and brain injury. This approach demonstrates the proactive effort required to equip staff with the essential skills and knowledge necessary for working effectively with young adults within the justice system.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

Of the cases we inspected, just under a third involved young adults from a Black or minority ethnic background. Staff assumed that these individuals would have experienced discrimination, and they reflected this in their assessments. However, the impact of this discrimination on the young adults and its relevance to the delivery of services was rarely discussed.

One manager told us:

“There is a lack of confidence in people asking questions about racism and discrimination in case they come across as ignorant. People can feel extremely uncomfortable in case they get it wrong. Most of the workforce is white female and not representative of the community. Staff wouldn’t know where to find services for people from minority backgrounds.”

One practitioner highlighted the challenges and training needs:

“Discrimination training would be good. How to respond to disclosure of discrimination from young adults. A lot of practitioners feel uncomfortable having these conversations and addressing this area.”

Staff should be equipped to openly discuss and explore issues of discrimination and racial disparity. This understanding is crucial for planning and delivering work that considers and addresses their experiences and the significance of this for them.

Training and development for unpaid work staff, court staff and programme facilitators

Unpaid work (UPW) supervisors spend significant time with young adults and are in a prime position to build relationships with them. During our inspections, we met some inspiring UPW supervisors, who demonstrated a good understanding of young adults and the challenges they face. Most were aware of the additional vulnerabilities that young adults may have and recognised the significance of this, especially in an UPW group setting, where others are usually older.

The Young Adults Policy Framework specifies that UPW supervisors, if made aware that a young adult has been assessed as having low maturity, should adjust and adapt their approach to supervision. However, very few UPW supervisors have received specific training on working with young adults. In Hull and East Riding, this issue has been recognised, and plans are in place for UPW supervisors to receive training to help them understand trauma and maturity, so they are able to better support young adults where these issues have been identified.

Similarly, programme staff have not received any specific training on maturity and development to help them consider how to adapt their approach to ensure programme delivery is inclusive and takes young adults’ needs into account.

Court staff

Most court staff were experienced practitioners and had been in their roles for a considerable period of time. The majority were aware that they needed to prioritise court reports for young adults and consider their specific needs.

The training received by court staff varied significantly across the inspected areas. In most cases, court staff had not received any training on completing maturity assessments. In one area, court staff were not aware of the young adult aide memoire, which is a tool used to assess maturity during the report-writing stage, or the importance of considering maturity in court reports at all.

Where court staff had not only been involved in training but were also well connected to the PDU and understood how their role aligned with the overall vision, there was a noticeable improvement in the quality of information provided to the court.

2.5. Conclusions and implications

The commitment set out in the Young Adults Policy Framework, to address the unique needs of young adults by taking a distinct approach to the delivery of probation services for them, is creditable. Putting this framework into practice, however, has been challenging for probation services. When the framework was introduced, there was not enough understanding of or attention paid to identifying what was needed to make it work. As a result, while there are some pockets of good work being done, it is not widespread. To embed the framework into practice, improved governance structures with clear lines of accountability need to be established for delivering it, and sufficient resources allocated.

In our sample, only half of the cases with high levels of identified need benefited from Commissioned Rehabilitative Services. Of those referred, a third did not engage with the services. It was, however, good to see that some areas benefited from services co-commissioned with Police and Crime Commissioners, which were specifically tailored to young adults.

Some described barriers to accessing age-specific data, for example on referral, engagement and completion rates, but we were assured that this data is available. Data disaggregated by age group will offer valuable insights into the specific needs of young adults and help to identify and address any disparities in service delivery. Informed by this data, the next round of commissioning should now be used to attract specialist services designed to address the specific needs of young adults.

In every area we inspected there were established joint processes to support the transition from youth to adult services and these were well developed. Although the numbers have reduced in recent years, there is little information available to help understand this cohort of young adults, as recording processes make it difficult to extract the relevant data. It is therefore not possible to track any trends, increases or reductions in case numbers.

Staff and managers emphasised the complexity and demands of working with young adults. Overall, they had not received sufficient training to implement mandatory aspects of the framework, such as completing maturity assessments. Where resources had been made available, not all staff were aware of them or felt confident in using them. To embed the trauma-informed approach advocated in the framework, staff must be provided with the necessary resources, training, and support to do the work well.

3. Information-sharing, interventions, and services

This chapter examines the effectiveness of information-sharing arrangements to inform and support the work delivered to young adults under probation supervision. It assesses the suitability of interventions and the provision of services to young adults. Lastly, it discusses the effectiveness of partnership work in supporting the delivery of high-quality services that meet the needs of young adults.

3.1. Information-sharing

Young adults known to the Probation Service may have experienced multiple traumas and, as a result, present with a spectrum of complex needs related to their offending behaviour. Addressing these needs is crucial in promoting desistance from further offending.

In the cases we inspected, and where information was recorded (noting significant gaps in recording), we observed the following demographic information:

- 38 per cent of young adults were identified as having a disability, mainly learning disabilities or mental health issues, with rates as high as 60 per cent in one area.
- Over a third of young adults had neurodiversity needs that significantly affected them.
- 48 per cent had previously been involved with children's social care, including child protection and child in need plans linked to experiences of neglect, abuse, and concerns about child criminal exploitation, with many having grown up in violent households.
- Almost a third of young adults had experience in the care system and most were receiving support from leaving care services.
- More than half had previous involvement with youth justice services (YJSs), with only nine being direct transfers from YJSs.
- In one area inspected, over two-thirds of young adults had recent involvement with both youth justice services and children's social care.

This profile illustrates the importance of having a detailed understanding of the complex needs of young adults, and the critical importance of information-sharing with agencies and services that have previously been involved with them.

Accessing information, particularly for court reports that are produced the same day, can be challenging. The timeframe is tight, and information is not always received back in time to be analysed and included in the report.

Practitioners we met with expressed frustration at the difficulties they experienced in accessing information from other agencies, describing the need to make multiple requests, repeatedly justify their need for information, and sometimes even navigate through local authority legal teams. They felt that some agencies are reluctant to share background information as they don't always see its relevance, given that the young adult is no longer a child.

In our sample, children's social care information was requested in only 36 of 72 cases where a report was produced, and YJSs were contacted in only six cases. Despite the difficulties noted above, these information requests should be made for every report, and the information received, if relevant, used to inform an assessment of maturity and the overall pre-sentence report, including sentencing recommendations.

We also found that practitioners were not always asking the right questions when requesting information from partner agencies. For example, when making enquiries with the police domestic abuse unit, they were often doing so only to assess whether the young adult had been a direct victim of domestic abuse or posed a risk to others in this context. They were not recognising that

home address checks may reveal that the young adult is living in a violent household, which could be contributing to their offending and/or posing a risk to their safety. Additionally, practitioners were not always attempting to find out whether the young adult had a history with children's social care as a vulnerable child; instead, the focus tended to be on any risk of harm they may pose to children.

Staff reported that it can be difficult to obtain police information, particularly from the police force intelligence bureau. This gap is especially problematic for practitioners working with young adults known to have been criminally exploited or at risk of exploitation, or linked to concerns about serious violence, as it limits their ability to complete a comprehensive risk and safeguarding assessment and to plan to manage any identified risks.

When assessing the risk of harm and risk of reoffending, practitioners cannot rely solely on the information held in a young adult's Police National Computer record, as this may not always show any out-of-court disposals that the young adult has received. The increasing use of out-of-court disposals to divert children from the criminal justice system means that young adults may appear in probation records with few or no convictions, despite having a considerable history with the YJS. For example, in one inspected case, a young adult's police record showed only one previous conviction, but they had actually received at least three youth justice diversion interventions. This information can often be obtained from the YJS.

Practitioners had sought authorisation from the young adults to access their records in less than half of the inspected cases. There was no consistency between seeking permission and actually accessing information; in some cases, information was accessed without permission, while in others, permission was sought and given but information was not obtained. This highlights the need for guidance on access to information in this context to ensure that appropriate practices are followed and that practitioners get the information they need to inform their work.

3.2. Interventions

Accredited programmes

Currently, there are no accredited programmes specifically designed for young adults, and there is no distinct approach to delivering programmes tailored to this age group. This issue was raised consistently by probation practitioners, who expressed concern that many of the young adults they work with may not be suited to groupwork settings, because of their specific needs and circumstances. Also, they did not feel it appropriate for them to be the only young adult in a group of older people. These views were also echoed by some groupwork facilitators.

Of the 115 cases inspected, only 20 young people were required to complete a programme. Just half of these individuals started the programme and only seven made sufficient progress. It was therefore disappointing to find that programme start and completion outcomes are not routinely broken down by age to assess any disparities and ensure equal access for young adults. Additionally, there is no analysis of who is not being referred for programmes and the reasons for this.

HMPPS is reviewing the existing suite of accredited offending behaviour programmes, to refine and develop the offer. During our inspection, we were unable to establish whether any new programmes would focus specifically on the risks and needs of young adults as a distinct group.

Despite a significant need, there are no specific knife or weapons interventions available in some areas where knife crime is prevalent among young adults. This issue is especially concerning given that a second knife offence automatically results in custody. In at least one area, staff were sourcing materials themselves to bridge the gap, but these were not accredited in line with HMPPS requirements.

Structured interventions and toolkits

The Choices and Changes toolkit is designed for use in one-to-one sessions with young adult males identified as having low psychosocial maturity. The exercises included in the pack aim to promote engagement and support young adults in developing their maturity. No equivalent intervention has been developed to address the needs of young women with similar challenges.

We found limited use of Choices and Changes in practice, possibly because staff had not been adequately trained to deliver it, which meant they did not understand the research behind the toolkit and lacked the confidence to deliver it effectively.

Next Steps is an award-winning transition programme initially developed by the London Probation Service region. It has since been rolled out nationally and is a valuable resource for practitioners in preparing young adults supervised by a YJS for their transition to adult probation. We saw limited use of this resource in practice, but where it was used in one case in Newham we noted that the young adult engaged well with the sessions delivered to prepare him for the move to adult probation supervision.

Structured interventions were used in only four of the cases we inspected.

In Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, treatment managers had taken a proactive approach by analysing the young adult caseload after recognising the low referral rates for programmes and structured interventions. They engaged with practitioners to discuss each individual's suitability for interventions based on identified needs and explored ways to engage those who might benefit from targeted work.

Unpaid work

Fifty-eight of the 115 young adults in our sample were required to complete UPW. Data from our adult core inspection programme (2021-2023) show that young adults are more likely to be sentenced to UPW and receive a higher number of hours than their older counterparts. Staff across our inspection consistently echoed this observation. One explanation offered was the perception that young adults are 'young, fit and able'. However, this view changes when considering the young adults whose cases we inspected and who were experiencing challenges such as high disability rates, neurodiversity, and mental health issues. These difficulties are not always known at the point of sentence.

There was a consistent view amongst staff that UPW was not always a suitable option for young adults because of barriers to attendance. Concerns included issues such as travelling on public transport, where there can be a risk of conflict with others for young people in some areas.

The UPW Target Operating Model states that no one should begin UPW prior to having the UPW assessment completed by the probation practitioner. Staff reported, however, that the timescale for starting UPW could make it difficult to complete a thorough, meaningful assessment, as they had not always had sufficient time to meet the young adults, get to know them, and fully assess their needs or any concerns they might have about UPW. This resulted in practice that does not align with the trauma-informed, person-centred approach set out in the policy framework.

People on probation can complete 30% of their hours engaging in education, training and employment activities through Community Campus, where they can earn educational and vocational certificates. We were interested to find out how many young adults had benefited from this opportunity in the inspected areas but found that this information is not routinely analysed at a local level.

High breach rates were raised as an issue throughout our inspection, but particularly in relation to UPW. It is also recognised at a national level that young adults are statistically less likely to complete UPW requirements. PDUs should analyse sentencing patterns and UPW completion rates to determine whether young adults in their area are engaging at the same rate as other people, and if not, why not.

We will take a closer look at UPW in a dedicated thematic inspection to be published in 2025.

3.3. The court context

The probation target for producing reports for young adults is 60 per cent, which we considered to be a low bar considering the complexities highlighted above. 64 per cent of the young adults' cases we inspected had a report produced for sentencing.

It was noted that sentencers may not always want reports to inform sentencing, as the focus in court is often on expediency, with the sentence determined by the offence type and the young adult's criminal history. This challenge is compounded when legal representatives push for the lowest possible sentence, which may not include probation intervention, despite clear indications of significant needs that require support for desistance and risk management for the young adult.

We were also informed that the position of a young adult on the court list often determined whether they received a report. If they appeared in the morning, sentencing was more likely to be postponed to the afternoon to allow for a report to be completed. However, in the afternoon when time was limited, they were more likely to be sentenced without a report.

Good practice example

In Bury and Rochdale, the court team completes PSRs for 65 per cent of young adults, exceeding the probation target. They have implemented a process where court staff meet daily with sentencers to review the listed cases and determine which should be prioritised for reports. The court staff feel they have influence and that their views are valued and listened to.

Some court staff expressed the view that, to promote better and more consistent services for young adults, there should be a dedicated court day where their needs are prioritised, and where sentencers have specialised knowledge about this group.

3.4. Access to services and work with partner agencies

Almost three-quarters of staff reported that they 'always' or 'most of the time' had access to an appropriate range of services to meet the needs and risks of the young adult. This high figure was in part due to the feedback from staff in Newham, who were working in a young adult hub with a host of co-located services and where the offer of support was excellent.

Good practice example

In Newham, young adults could access support from a range of mentors, much of which was culturally informed to match the demographic of the community. The health offer was particularly impressive. All young adults were assessed for speech, language and communication needs and received ongoing support if they required it. This was making a significant difference to some young adults, whose neurodiversity needs were being assessed for the first time. It was also pleasing to see some analysis from health partners that showed that engagement with health also promoted better engagement with statutory appointments. This is an important finding.

In other areas, the situation was more varied. Staff encountered difficulties in accessing services to meet the needs of the young adults they were working with.

All areas expressed concern about the 'cliff edge' effect, where many services drop off at age 18, and there is limited targeted provision in adult probation services for young adults. In some cases, the probation practitioner was the only person involved in supporting the young adult. This made their relationship with them all the more critical and the demand on their time even greater.

In our consultation with young adults, 59 per cent reported having access to the services they needed. However, those with more complex needs were less likely to feel that they received the support they required.

One young adult told us:

“The wellbeing team who have done my anger support are amazing. They haven’t rushed me to change or get results and it doesn’t feel like a tick box thing that sometimes courses and that on probation do so I think that is really good and the grief counselling has been good too.”

Conversely, another told us:

“I have not been offered any help whatsoever, my probation office does absolutely nothing to help me at all. In fact, they just make my mental health worse.”

In nearly every area we visited, leaders had actively considered ways to close gaps in the services available for young adults. In Liverpool South, the Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) wellbeing provider, the Growth Company, collaborated with Everton in the Community to improve their services for young adults through sports activities. Additionally, two PSO grade posts were established using Integrated Offender Management (IOM) funding to offer outreach support to young adults beyond those in the IOM cohort.

In most areas, young adults transitioning from youth justice to adult services were offered additional support and access to services through the IOM scheme, which was generally considered effective. However, for other young adults who had not transitioned, accessing services was contingent on meeting a threshold primarily based on risk of reoffending. Among the cases we inspected, 21 young adults were deemed suitable for IOM, and seven of them accessed the service. Those who accessed IOM made good progress as a result of the support they received.

Almost a third of the young adults whose cases we reviewed had been in care and were eligible for leaving care services, with most accessing this support. Practitioners spoke highly of the support provided to these young adults, and inspectors observed effective joint planning and delivery between probation staff and leaving care personal advisers. This collaborative approach supported the overall quality of the work delivered to the young adults and contributed positively to supporting their needs.

In some cases, adult safeguarding referrals are needed to address significant welfare concerns. Where this had been done well, practitioners were direct in their approach, ensuring that vulnerable young adults were able to access much-needed support. However, we also noted some cases where referrals were necessary but were not made. This highlights the need for clearer guidance for probation practitioners on thresholds for adult social care and expectations in relation to referrals. It cannot be assumed that thresholds will not be met due to perceived demand on these services.

In most areas, there was limited awareness of what specialist provision might be available locally. We observed the use of outside specialist services in only a third of the cases we reviewed.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

There is less focus on young women in the Young Adults Policy Framework, and this was consistently raised during our inspection. There is no designated tool to assess maturity specifically for young women, and there are no targeted toolkits available to be used with them. Additionally, while young women typically access support and interventions through women’s hubs, the approach won’t always be tailored to their age and level of maturity. There was little difference in the quality of assessment and planning for young women compared to young men. However, the reviewing of their desistance and progress, and their safety and wellbeing needs, was poorer quality than for young men, and requires attention.

Good practice example

As part of the Youth to Adult project, Advance provides an age-, gender-, and trauma-responsive approach to young women on probation at Newham's East London women's centre. Using their Minerva model, they take a holistic view of young women's needs, and offer consistent support through keyworkers, groups, and activities in a women's-only safe space.

Young women can attend their probation appointments at the women's centre and access wrap-around support from Advance for 12 to 18 months. This means that keywork support often extends beyond the length of their probation intervention. The partnership between Advance and probation enables young women to attend their probation appointments in a gender-informed environment and receive holistic, age-appropriate support from both agencies.

3.5. Conclusions and implications

To work effectively with young adults in a manner that is both maturity- and trauma-informed, staff must understand their life experiences. Given their age, the young adults' significant childhood experiences are especially relevant because, for many, they are recent events. To complete a timely court report or initial assessment, staff need to access all relevant information swiftly, emphasising the importance of effective information-sharing agreements and practices across agencies.

In almost half of the cases we inspected, the young person had previous, and often significant, involvement with children's social care. We found that court orders frequently begin without all relevant information being received and/or analysed to inform the assessment and interventions. Information is rarely sought from YJSs, despite many young adults on probation having been previously involved with them. YJSs hold a wealth of information on the children they work with and, if probation staff were to access this, it would give them a better understanding of the individual, their needs and their life experiences. This includes information on previous out-of-court disposals, which may not always appear on police records but could help explain any patterns of offending.

There are established processes for conducting domestic abuse checks with the police domestic abuse unit. This information exchange focuses primarily on situations where a person on probation has been a victim or perpetrator of domestic abuse. What is typically not considered is exposure to domestic abuse, which is a significant factor in the life experiences of many young adults on probation and which needs to be considered in relation to risk and safeguarding.

We noted some excellent examples of partnership working in practice, for example the work between probation services and leaving care teams to support young adults who are care-experienced. Working in partnership on these cases resulted in better quality assessment and planning, often involving a coordinated approach to delivering interventions and improved access to services through shared resources.

Currently, there are no specific targeted approaches for young women, whose needs are often addressed based on gender with limited attention paid to their maturity. To foster a more tailored approach to working with diverse groups, including those from minority ethnic backgrounds, practitioners need to increase their awareness of available third-sector providers who specialise in engaging young adults from different backgrounds.

Analysing referral, start, and completion rates for young adults would provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of groupwork programmes and UPW. UPW needs specific attention due to its higher use for young adults and reported challenges related to engagement and completion.

4. Quality of reports and case supervision

This chapter reports on the quality of work undertaken with young adults. It examines the practitioners' understanding of maturity, and how it is assessed and accounted for at the point of sentence and throughout the period of supervision. The chapter also evaluates how well the Young Adults Policy Framework is being applied in practice and comments on youth justice to adult probation transition work.

4.1. Assessment

Court work and reports

Data from our adult core inspection programme shows that the quality of reports for young adults is consistently lower than those written for older people. For those over the age of 26, the quality of reports met our standards in 47 per cent of cases; for young adults, they were sufficient in only 23 per cent of cases.

Our inspection findings align with concerns raised by the Magistrates' Association (2021), specifically the limited focus on the connection between maturity and the offence, as well as a lack of consideration of maturity in the recommended sentence in pre-sentence reports.

In 73 of the 115 cases we inspected, young adults were sentenced with a court report. Most of these were short-format written reports deemed generally appropriate for the case. However, the maturity of the young adult was adequately considered, and their needs sufficiently understood by the report author, in only half of these reports. As a result, their offending behaviour was not contextualised for the court. The maturity assessment tool was used in even fewer cases (28). We observed that the use of the tool did not consistently result in reports that were more maturity informed.

In 33 of the 73 cases we inspected, information from the police domestic abuse unit was requested and available before advice was presented to court. In 22 cases, information from children's social care had been requested, received and included in the information given to sentencers. In over two-thirds of cases, no checks were made with the youth justice service (YJS) to enquire if they had worked with the young adult in recent years. This is significant given that in 54 per cent of our randomly selected cases for this inspection, the young adult had previous experience of the youth justice system. YJSs hold a wealth of information on the young adults they have worked with, including any welfare and diversity needs, as well as information about previous responses to supervision. All of this would be relevant to the maturity assessment and understanding of need. They also know about previous out-of-court disposals a young person may have had, which may be relevant to risk assessments.

In the cases we inspected, 15 young adults who were sentenced as adults were 17 years old or younger when they committed their offences. However, due to reported delays and backlogs in the justice system, they were sentenced in an adult court and subjected to adult processes. It is even more critical in these cases that practitioners ensure there is full recognition of the individual's age at the time of the offence, and that their age and maturity are fully considered during the sentencing process.

Reports did not routinely consider experiences of trauma, and paid sufficient attention to the young adult's wellbeing in only 55 per cent of cases. Diversity issues were too often overlooked, and there was limited reference to positive factors and strengths in half of the cases. The practitioner had considered whether the young adult would be able to comply with their sentence in less than half of the cases. This is an oversight that could have significant consequences for young adults and may be linked to the high rates of breach for this group.

Overall, we were satisfied with the quality of reports in just under a quarter of cases, with significant variation between areas.

Poor practice example

Jordan was sentenced to custody following an oral report. The court officer completed a maturity assessment and the score was relayed to court, but no context was provided or consideration of how his low maturity affected him. No enquiries were made with the police or children's social care, and an oral report was not appropriate given Jordan's age and imminent risk of custody. Post-sentence, the allocated probation practitioner established that Jordan had prior involvement with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and had been subject to a child protection plan. There had been concerns that he was being exploited by older people. The court would have benefited from knowing this before sentence.

Assessment

In the majority of cases, practitioners actively engaged young adults in their assessments (86 of 115 cases). They considered factors such as their level of motivation, readiness and willingness to participate in required interventions.

In the majority of cases, the assessment accurately identified young adults' strengths and protective factors, as well as the factors contributing to their offending behaviour and potential barriers to desistance. Mental health and emotional difficulties, substance misuse, identity issues, a lack of control over daily life, and the absence of goals, as well as limited ability to build social capital, were recurring features in the lives of the young adults whose cases we inspected.

Assessments were not consistently informed by information from other agencies when their input would have been expected and where it would have added value. This was in part because practitioners did not always ask for the necessary information and, when they did, they did not always ask all the right questions. While it is common practice for probation practitioners to ask the police domestic abuse team to determine whether a person has been a victim or perpetrator of domestic abuse, they do not always establish whether domestic abuse has been witnessed by individuals living at the address. As a result, it can be difficult to assess whether the young adult has been or is currently living in a violent environment, whether this might be contributing to their offending or whether there might be any safeguarding concerns that need to be considered. Where relevant information was requested and received, it was sufficiently analysed and incorporated into the assessment in just over half of cases.

The situation mirrored that of checks with children's social care. Practitioners did not consistently ask for information and, when they did, they did not always use it to inform their assessment and overall understanding of the young adult. There was a pattern of seeking information related to any risk the young adult might pose to children, without examining whether the young adult had previously been involved with social services themselves. From our own local authority checks we found that at least half of the young adults in our inspection had a history of social care involvement in various capacities. In one area, 73 per cent of the cases we inspected shared this significant experience.

Understanding the life experiences of young adults is crucial for supporting them effectively, especially considering challenges such as low maturity and other difficulties they may face. It is vital that practitioners get the best understanding of the young adult, because this equips them with the necessary insights to engage in meaningful conversations, even when topics are difficult to discuss. This approach is essential in helping young adults to explore any underlying factors that may be driving their offending behaviour, which they may not have fully recognised. It also means they do not have to explain and go over things they have already discussed with other professionals.

A young adult expressed the importance of information-sharing from their perspective:

“If I could have a say in how probation is run, I’d like them to request proper handover documents from YOT teams so they know us better and we don’t have to go over same stuff and then they might know who we are better and how to help us.”

The better the understanding practitioners have, the more likely it will be that they can approach the young adult with empathy, forming the basis of a positive relationship. It is crucial for individuals who have experienced trauma and difficult life experiences, particularly younger people, to avoid repeatedly revisiting their circumstances. The Young Adults Policy Framework appropriately emphasises the need to consider past trauma and adverse childhood experiences, but we found that this had been done in only 60 per cent of assessments.

Good practice example

Tom was supervised by the probation service in Gloucestershire. The assessment provides good insight into the factors involved in Tom’s offending and further explores the aspects of his behaviour that indicate low maturity, such as his poor problem-solving skills and lack of organisation. Tom is care-experienced, and he has witnessed violence as a child and experienced significant trauma. The practitioner analyses how this could have contributed to some of the negative attitudes he has been displaying towards women. The assessment also explores how his care experiences may have impacted on his sense of control and responsibility. The practitioner recognises that Tom’s belief that professionals only view him as a ‘criminal’ may affect his motivation to engage with probation from the outset. Addressing this and discussing it with Tom is therefore prioritised.

Diversity and discrimination

Issues related to discrimination were rarely addressed with young adults, even though practitioners recognised that many of them had multiple protected characteristics, alongside their age, and were likely to have encountered discrimination and challenges as a result. The failure to engage in these discussions at the assessment stage meant the impact of any experiences of discrimination remained unexplored and was not, therefore, always considered in the planning and delivery of services. If practitioners are to offer meaningful support and positively engage young adults in their interventions, they need to understand and take into account any experiences of discrimination and any impact that these have had on the individual’s development, self-esteem, and wellbeing.

Poor practice example

Cristian is a Romanian national who has listed Romanian as his preferred language. No contact was made with him in custody or immediately after release, and all subsequent contact appears to have been in English. There is no record of the use of an interpreter. The assessment considers that Cristian’s offending is linked to poor thinking skills due to a low level of maturity. However, the assessment fails to consider his experience as a Romanian national coming to England as an adolescent, any experiences of discrimination, difficulties with not being able to speak the language, and being drawn into criminality at a young age by older people (as shared with his keyworker in custody).

4.2. Planning

Young adults were actively involved in planning in 63 per cent of cases, with work to develop strengths and build on protective factors evident. However, practitioners did not adequately focus

on addressing factors linked to offending. Both elements are important for delivering holistic and well-targeted work.

Barriers to engagement were present in all but three cases in the sample, but they were identified and sufficiently planned for in only 58. Only 20 per cent of relevant cases included discussions about experiences of discrimination and their potential impact. At the planning stage all potential challenges need to be identified and explored with the young adult, so that they have the best possible chance of being able to engage with and benefit from their interventions and successfully complete their sentence.

The toolkit most frequently included in planning was Choices and Changes (27 cases), and we would have expected to have seen it used more widely. Referrals to Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS) were included in planning in just under two-thirds of cases. Support for education, training, and employment (ETE) was the most needed service by a significant margin. ETE was identified as a significant issue for 36 per cent of the young adults whose cases we inspected.

Not all appropriate CRS pathways were identified and established at the planning stage, and when practitioners made referrals to CRS, they did not consistently include all the relevant information about risk and safeguarding issues. This lack of alignment between probation practitioners' plans and CRS providers' understanding of needs and risks does not promote a shared understanding of the young adult or a coordinated approach to working with them.

Practitioners expressed concerns about the suitability of group work for young adults and their capacity to function effectively in that environment. However, in over half of the cases where the suitability of this should have been considered by the practitioner developing the intervention plan, it was not. Where we identified that structured interventions may have been suitable, they were considered in only 27 per cent of cases at the planning stage.

Overall, planning did not consistently address the root causes of young adults' offending, support their engagement and desistance, or set the right targets to manage and reduce risks.

4.3. Sentence delivery

Supporting the engagement of young adults from their perspective

One of the most significant findings from our consultation with young adults was their consistent view that their relationship with their practitioner was the 'make or break' factor that determined whether they would successfully engage. Feeling listened to was key, and when they felt their workers took the time to try to understand them, this was unanimously seen as beneficial. One young adult noted the variation in the way practitioners work and how one worker stood out in their approach.

They told us:

"The other two have been not good, the second one was really understanding, it seemed like she had been through something herself, so she wanted to help whereas the other two just seemed like they were there for the money. Second one was non-judgmental, very professional, and it is very important they understand the transition from childhood to being a young adult. I felt like the second one did understand this."

Once trust is established with a practitioner, young adults described the benefit of having somebody to talk to. For many, this is a new experience. The skills and understanding of the worker, coupled with being able to spend the time building a relationship, can really help to support important work such as making sure young adults are safe and supported.

One young adult described the benefits of this for them:

“My worker is easy to talk to about things, they also helped me after I got jumped multiple times and after I tried to commit suicide and got me appointments with the wellbeing team.”

Equally, a trusting relationship means that work to address risk and reoffending can be undertaken more effectively, as in this case:

“A good officer in my eyes is one what understands me and helps me figure out what I did and why and can help me understand my anger issues.”

Community sentence supervision

Based on the feedback we received from young adults, it was pleasing to find that, in most cases, practitioners focused on building and maintaining an effective working relationship with them. The frequency and nature of the appointments offered were appropriate, and practitioners applied flexibility to support and encourage the engagement and participation of young adults whenever possible and when required.

Where compliance was good, most interventions began on time. In just under two-thirds of cases, the content of the sessions with the young adult was focused and purposeful. However, interventions were not always sequenced appropriately, and this is an area that requires strengthening. This was partly because of the need to meet timeframes and referral deadlines, such as referring the young adult to UPW. It was not always appropriate for a young adult to start UPW before other work had been done or relationships had been built. This approach is essential to enable practitioners to properly assess any concerns that young adults may have about participating in the interventions set out in the plan, or to support them effectively through it.

Home visits were completed at the start of the sentence in just over half of the cases. This was a missed opportunity for practitioners to get an informed understanding of the young adults' home circumstances and any issues that might be impacting them. Additionally, home visits provide an opportunity to meet with wider family members and include them in the interventions. This can improve the holistic support provided for the young adult.

In most cases, attendance at appointments was monitored. Probation practitioners maintained sufficient contact with other people involved in delivering elements of the sentence, such as programme facilitators and CRS providers. This proactive approach provided an opportunity to intervene swiftly if concerns were emerging regarding compliance.

Young adults had been referred to specialist third-sector organisations in just over a third of cases. This referral rate was highest in Newham, where services were co-located in the hub. This enabled staff to pool information about the services available in the local community. In most other areas, we found a lack of knowledge about what services were available in the community. In the context of staff concerns about the limitations of CRS provision, it was surprising to find that little thought had been given to how other services might offer sustainable support to young adults. Practitioners said they were discouraged from being creative in this way, as these activities would not contribute to completed rehabilitation activity requirement days. This seemed to overlook the fact that these services may be able to help young adults and offer ongoing support. They also cited risk as a barrier, saying that if service level agreements were not in place, they would not make referrals due to concerns about risk and out of fear of an incident occurring.

Only 10 of the young adults whose cases we inspected completed accredited programmes. Among them, seven successfully engaged and made significant progress, while three did not make sufficient progress due to non-engagement.

Structured interventions were delivered in just three cases, with only one young adult successfully engaging. Additionally, toolkits were used in only 40 cases, with 22 of these using the specifically targeted Choices and Changes toolkit. Just over half made progress, while compliance was an issue for the rest.

The CRS provider delivered sessions in 47 cases where a referral was made, but 13 young adults who were referred did not receive a service. In a third of cases, no referral was made when it should have been. Additionally, young adults did not always engage with the services they were offered through CRS. Around 30 per cent of the 47 young adults referred made sufficient progress.

Where young adults were required to complete UPW, insufficient attention was paid to the suitability of the placement. Additionally, where low maturity had been identified, action was taken by UPW supervisors to support engagement and compliance in just seven out of 59 cases. In some areas staff highlighted concerns about automatic enforcement letters being sent if young adults missed UPW sessions and this was done without consultation with them to establish if they had any information relating to the absence. Practitioners were able to take action to withdraw the warning after it had been sent if they felt this was appropriate, but they did not always do so.

In over half of the cases, practitioners paid sufficient attention to the specific needs of young adults in the delivery of services. It was positive to see that, in most cases, they made efforts to enable the young adult to complete their sentence, including flexibility to take appropriate account of their personal circumstances. However, in over a third of cases, practitioners took enforcement action when we felt other options could have been considered to try to re-engage the young adult. In many cases, this was linked to the sentence plan not being suitable or achievable for the young adult in the first place. In part, this was because of gaps in information and/or a lack of analysis and understanding at the court report and initial assessment stage. We noted a considered approach to enforcement action in the following example:

Good practice example

In Gloucestershire, a young adult facing chaotic living conditions and multiple vulnerabilities struggled to engage and keep appointments. The breach process was followed, and the case listed for court. Alongside this, a meeting took place with family members to bolster support and encourage re-engagement. This was successful and, based on the progress made, the breach was withdrawn from court. This reinforced the importance of engagement, strengthened family relationships and acknowledged the progress the young adult had made.

Practitioners took a sufficiently maturity-informed approach to sentence delivery in just 36 of the 65 community cases. Despite the efforts staff made to engage young adults, they did not always use the relationships formed to focus on offending behaviour and risk of harm issues. Nor did they sufficiently focus on interventions required to keep the young adult safe.

4.4. Reviewing and outcomes

Young adults were not consistently involved in the reviewing process, resulting in missed opportunities to give them feedback on positive progress or to discuss how to improve engagement. Feedback, whether positive or constructive, can be a powerful tool for engagement, particularly for young adults in the criminal justice system, who may have received little feedback in their lives.

Including young adults in the reviewing process also gives them an opportunity to offer feedback on the services they are receiving, raise any concerns they have about the plan of work, highlight any barriers that may be affecting their engagement, and ask for any additional support they feel they need. While these issues can be addressed in supervision sessions, considering them within the context of the young adult's intervention plan fosters a more collaborative approach. It takes their maturity into account, as well as any other challenges known to be more prevalent within this group.

Reviewing did not always focus on developing strengths and protective factors in the way we would have wanted it to. We also did not see adaptations being made to the plan where these were required, whether in relation to progress made or in respect of increased concerns about risk. This

was a missed opportunity to tailor interventions effectively and address emerging needs to support the young adult's progress and rehabilitation.

By the point of first review, 26 young adults had been charged with or convicted of a new offence that had taken place after sentence, and 12 had received a conviction or disposal for offences that pre-dated the sentence we were inspecting. Only a third of those with substance misuse problems made sufficient progress in accessing and engaging with support. Less than half of young adults who required mental health support received it. There was a similar picture for emotional support and the delivery of work to develop a pro-social identity. Improving family contact had particularly poor outcomes: relationships deteriorated in about 18 per cent of relevant cases.

Licence cases

We inspected 18 cases involving young adults under licence supervision. In 15 cases, the assessment had covered the factors linked to reoffending. In most cases there was an emphasis on identifying positive factors to help the young adult to make more progress. However, many in this group presented with a higher risk of harm profile than those who had received a community sentence, and there was often insufficient focus on assessing risk factors and analysing how they would be managed on release from custody. Low maturity can give rise to behaviours such as impulsivity, which need to be considered in the context of offending, support, and intervention. This was not taken into account in most cases and the assessment of risk posed to others was adequate in only half of the licence cases.

Young adults who have experienced custody often have some of the most challenging life experiences, including being in prison at a young age. Leaving custody is typically a high-risk period for these individuals, and they may not always have access to the support they need. Unfortunately, issues related to safety and wellbeing tended to be overlooked more for these young adults than for those who received community sentences. Little attention was paid to their levels of maturity to assess and identify low maturity, consider its impact on their decision-making and consider how to mitigate any associated risks. We found that there was sufficient focus on the safety and wellbeing of the young adult in only six out of 18 cases.

Poor practice example

Ben has had past involvement with children's social care and is deemed high risk by the youth justice service. He is known to be at risk of exploitation from older people. The assessment, however, pays little attention to his safety and wellbeing. His life circumstances, level of maturation and potential trauma are not factored into rehabilitation planning. These gaps make it less likely that the right services and interventions will be provided on release from custody.

Eight of the licence cases we inspected involved young adults from a minority ethnic background, highlighting what we already know to be a troubling over-representation of this group. None were asked about any experiences of discrimination to understand and assess any impact on them and to consider this in the delivery of services for them.

In 11 cases, the young adult was sentenced to custody without a court report. In cases where a report was produced, it was more likely to be a short-format report, which we did not consider to be the most appropriate for the circumstances. We considered only one of the seven reports produced to have been of sufficient quality; others had gaps in information and limited analysis of the young adult's circumstances. In three of these cases, the young adult was being sentenced for offences committed before they were 18, and half received a sentence of six months or less. Despite the large majority of the young adults having been known to YJSs and children's social care, there was little evidence that checks had been made to understand more about that contact.

Quality of sentence planning

In less than half of licence cases inspected, the probation practitioner made a sufficient level of contact with the young adult before release. Overall, the quality of sentence planning was poorer than for those subject to community sentences, which is a concern. It is essential that practitioners focus on resettlement and understand any challenges young adults may face on release from custody if they are to help them to successfully reintegrate into society and avoid reoffending. The following example demonstrates this well.

Good practice example

Kieran is a young person supervised on licence in Hull and East Riding. A comprehensive assessment addressed his specific needs and circumstances. This included the impact of low maturity on his behaviour and risk of harm, recognising that this may influence his ability to engage with supervision. The assessment makes it clear that building a relationship with Kieran and motivating him to engage with licence supervision will be the main priority. The delivery of interventions is appropriately sequenced, with the right balance of addressing offending behaviour, meeting needs such as mental health and promoting maturity through the delivery of the Choices and Changes toolkit.

By identifying these maturity-related factors, the assessment lays the foundation for a targeted plan to address Kieran's needs and manage his risks effectively. This included the delivery of interventions to develop internal controls and to protect potential victims. Information-sharing, joint working and risk-monitoring with partner agencies were also in place.

Due to vulnerabilities linked to Kieran's home circumstances, suitable accommodation plans were put in place to support his safety and wellbeing.

Improving the quality of sentence planning for young adults leaving custody requires their meaningful involvement and contribution to the process. This will promote engagement and identify any barriers to compliance early.

4.5. Transition work

In the small sample of cases inspected where the young adult had transitioned directly from youth justice services, we found that the quality of planning did not support a smooth transition to adult probation services. Delays in assigning the case to a probation practitioner resulted in limited time for planning, a critical component of effective transition work. Preparing the young adult for the change and providing them with an opportunity to get to know their new worker before transfer is essential for supporting and promoting ongoing engagement. In four cases, we found no transition plan in place at all, which led to missed opportunities to involve other relevant professionals, such as health, education, and employment services, to support continuity of supervision and care. Similarly, we observed little evidence of the young adult's family being involved in planning, nor any indication that the young adult had specifically asked for them not to be involved.

In most cases where the young adult was subject to child safeguarding procedures, their vulnerabilities were not fully understood, and any potential need for adult safeguarding to be involved, especially when children's social care withdrew their support, were not routinely considered. Practitioners did not carry out checks with the police domestic abuse unit during the transition process. In the only case where a check was completed, the enquiry focused only on the young adult as a potential domestic abuse perpetrator, rather than considering the possibility that they may be living in a violent home environment.

Diversity issues and protected characteristics were addressed and considered in less than half of cases. Fully understanding a young adult's needs is crucial for facilitating a successful transition, as

it allows the practitioner to make necessary adjustments to their approach and to deliver interventions effectively. Given the significance of the transition and the differences between services, it is natural for a young adult to struggle. If not handled appropriately, this could affect their engagement and compliance, with potential consequences for themselves and, if there is an identified risk to others, a risk to them too.

Poor practice example

Harry was transferred to the Probation Service as he turned 18. Records indicate that a 'handover' meeting took place between Harry, his YJS case manager and a probation practitioner. Harry's social worker was not included and there was no note of the meeting. No specific plan was made at the point of transition to help understand what work Harry had completed on his youth rehabilitation order and how probation was going to build on it.

4.6 Conclusions and implications

During our consultation with young adults, they told us that their relationship with probation practitioners is critical in helping them engage with probation services, access interventions and support, and successfully complete their sentences. For them, it's often 'make or break'. The focus on building meaningful relationships was a strength in much of the casework we inspected. Practitioners genuinely want the best for young adults, and they are motivated to work with them. However, they need to do more to ensure that young adults' needs are understood and met, that their safety and wellbeing are prioritised, and that, where risk issues have been identified, other people are kept safe.

Not all young adults who would have benefited from a court report had received one. Where maturity assessments had been completed, they were not consistently informing sentencing proposals. Overall, reports lacked sufficient detail to assist the court in reaching the most appropriate sentencing decision that is both achievable for the young adult and likely to address the identified concerns and reduce any risk issues. To be meaningful, this information must be analysed in the context of the young adult's assessed level of maturity.

While we noted examples of good practice, gaps in information and in practitioners' understanding about the significance of maturity and development had an impact on the quality of most aspects of their work. Improvements are required if the ambition to work differently with young adults, particularly those assessed as having lower levels of maturity, is to be achieved. The quality of services delivered to young adults in custody requires particular attention. This group often face the most challenges. They are vulnerable, and are often assessed as posing a more significant risk to others. Getting it right at the point of release from custody is critical if they are to succeed in the community.

In all aspects of work, there needs to be a focus on young adults' diversity needs, whether age is their only presenting protected characteristic for consideration or whether they present with multiple complex and diverse needs. This requires a thoughtful and considered approach. Practitioners should be equipped to discuss experiences of discrimination with young adults and offer support where it is required. A more creative approach could be supported by specialist external services. High numbers of those sentenced as adults have extensive involvement with YJS and children's services, and the small number of cases inspected showed that young people need to be better prepared for the move to adult services.

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Annexe 1: Glossary

Accredited programme	A programme of work delivered to offenders in groups or individually through a requirement in a community order or a suspended sentence order, or as part of a custodial sentence or a condition in a prison licence. Programmes are reviewed by the Correctional Services Advice and Accreditation Panel (CSAAP), which may then recommend to His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) that a programme be awarded accredited status. Programmes are then accredited by HMPPS directly.
Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)	ACEs are highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. They can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, the young person's safety, security, trust or bodily integrity.
Care leaver	The legal definition of a care leaver comes from the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which states that a care leaver is someone who has been in the care of the local authority for a period of 13 weeks or more spanning their 16th birthday.
Child in need plan	A child in need plan contains the support that is being provided to a child and/or family by children's services.
Child protection	Work to make sure that that all reasonable action has been taken to keep to a minimum the risk of a child coming to harm.
Child criminal exploitation	Child criminal exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.
Choices and Changes Programme	A HMPPS resource pack for probation practitioners or prison offender managers to use in one-to-one sessions with young adults who have been identified as having low psychosocial maturity. The exercises in the pack aim to encourage engagement and help young adults to develop their maturity.
Education, training and employment (ETE)	Work to improve an individual's learning, and to increase their employment prospects.
HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)	The single agency responsible for both prisons and probation services.
Integrated Offender Management (IOM)	IOM brings a cross-agency response to the crime and reoffending threats faced by local communities. The most persistent and problematic offenders are identified and managed jointly by partner agencies working together.
Maturity screening tool	The maturity screening tool is a 10-item assessment devised to help practitioners identify those individuals with lower levels of maturity who are most in need of support.
MoJ	Ministry of Justice

OASys	Offender assessment system currently used in England and Wales by the Probation Service to measure the risks and needs of offenders under supervision.
Out-of-court disposal	Out-of-court disposals can be used for children who have admitted an offence, but it is not in the public interest to prosecute as it is not always appropriate for children that commit a crime to be sent to court. It may be appropriate for the police and youth justice services to consider an out-of-court disposal.
Partners	Partners include statutory and non-statutory organisations that work with the participant/offender through a partnership agreement with the Probation Service.
Providers	Providers deliver a service or input commissioned by and provided under contract to the Probation Service. This includes the staff and services provided under the contract, even when they are integrated or located within the Probation Service.
Pre-sentence report (PSR)	This refers to any report prepared for a court, whether delivered orally or in a written format.
Probation officer (PO)	This is the term for a qualified responsible officer who has undertaken a higher education-based course for two years. The name of the qualification and content of the training varies depending on when it was undertaken. They manage more complex cases
Probation services officer (PSO)	This is the term for a responsible officer who was originally recruited with no qualification. They may access locally determined training to qualify as a PSO or to build on this to qualify as a probation officer. They may manage all but the most complex cases depending on their level of training and experience. Some PSOs work within the court setting, where their duties include writing pre-sentence reports.
Rehabilitation activity requirement (RAR)	From February 2015, when the Offender Rehabilitation Act was implemented, courts can specify a number of RAR days within an order; it is for probation services to decide on the precise work to be done during these RAR days.
Trauma-informed practice	Trauma-informed approaches have become increasingly cited in policy and adopted in practice as a means for reducing the negative impact of trauma experiences and supporting mental and physical health outcomes. They build on evidence developed over several decades. However, there has been a lack of consensus within the health and social care sector on how trauma-informed practice is defined, what its key principles are and how it can be built into services and systems.

Annexe 2: Methodology

This inspection sought to answer the following questions:

Does governance and leadership of the PDU support and promote the delivery of high-quality, personalised and responsive services for young adults?

- Is there an effective vision and strategy setting the direction and driving the delivery of a high-quality service for young adults?
- Is there sufficient analysis of the needs, risks and characteristics of young adults?
- Do commissioning arrangements prioritise the delivery of services to young adults?
- Are there effective governance arrangements and clear delivery plans that translate the vision and the strategy into effective case supervision for young adults?
- Is the implementation and impact of the strategy on delivery monitored and regularly reviewed?
- Are there effective partnership arrangements in place at a strategic level to support the delivery of a joined-up service to support the needs of young adults?

Are staff within the service empowered to deliver high-quality, personalised and responsive services that meet the needs of young adults?

- Are practitioners' and managers' workloads reasonable to deliver services that meet the needs of young adults?
- Are practitioners provided with the right guidance, development, support and oversight to ably work with young adults?
- Are cases allocated to staff who are appropriately skilled and experienced to work with young adults?
- Is there an effective induction for staff that addresses work with young adults?
- Have staff had sufficient training to equip them to work effectively with young adults?

Is a comprehensive range of high-quality services in place, enabling personalised and responsive provision to meet the needs of young adults?

- Is there a sufficiently comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of the profile of young adults to ensure that their needs are understood and met?
- How do partnership arrangements facilitate effective service delivery to meet the needs of young adults, promote their wellbeing and keep other people safe?
- Does the Probation Service have the volume, range and quality of services, including commissioned services, to meet the needs of young adults?
- Do probation staff use relevant toolkits and interventions specifically tailored for young adults, as appropriate?

Is timely and relevant information available to support a high-quality, personalised and responsive approach for young adults?

- Are analysis, evidence and learning used effectively to drive service improvement for young adults?
- Are processes used to capture the views of young adults to understand their experiences of the services they have received? How is this information used to drive improvements?
- Are the necessary policies relating to service delivery to young adults in place and understood by the staff to whom they apply?
- Do staff understand how to access the right services from partners and providers to meet the needs of young adults?

- Are relevant information-sharing processes in place with other agencies to ensure the timely exchange of information?

Is the pre-sentence information and advice provided to court sufficiently analytical and personalised, and does it take into account age and maturity and support fair and objective decision-making?

- Are young adults meaningfully involved in the preparation of their reports, and are their views considered?
- Does the advice consider maturity, diversity, personal circumstances and any structural barriers?
- Are proposals appropriate?
- Is there a process for quality-assuring reports and does this refer to young adults?

Does service delivery focus sufficiently on the needs of young adults, diversity factors, risk management and understanding barriers to engagement?

- How does assessment, planning and service delivery focus sufficiently on understanding and addressing the needs, wellbeing and risk of young adults and address any barriers that may impact on their engagement with interventions?
- In the individual cases inspected, were enforcement actions (for example breach, recall and warning letters) applied appropriately and fairly?
- Is the evaluation of early outcomes for young adults positive, demonstrating progress in relation to engagement, desistance, wellbeing, and the safety of other people?

Fieldwork

Between January and March 2024, we examined the quality of work delivered by probation delivery units in Bury and Rochdale; Newham; Liverpool; Gloucestershire; Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland; and Hull and East Riding. Areas were selected primarily because of the numbers of young adults on their caseload.

We reviewed 115 cases of young adults aged 18 to 21 who were under community supervision and had been sentenced to or released from custody in the 12 months before our fieldwork. Additionally, we examined nine cases where young adults had transitioned from youth justice services (YJS) to probation and assessed the quality of 73 court reports. We did not review YJS case files or inspect the quality of their transition work. We have not inspected or commented on the quality of work undertaken with young adults in custody.

We interviewed 78 case-holding probation practitioners, specialist staff, middle and senior managers, national young adult leads, and partner agencies. Additionally, we held meetings with senior leaders in the national HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) teams.

Before the fieldwork, we contacted the local YJSs to ask whether they had previously worked with the individual young adults and whether the young adults had previously had contact with children’s social services. We did this to assess the quality of information-sharing and to ascertain whether probation practitioners had considered the background experiences of the young adults.

We engaged the services of User Voice to conduct surveys and interviews with 259 young adults on our behalf, gathering their perspectives on the services they received from probation.

Characteristics of the main probation sample

Age	No.	%
18	8	7

19	38	33
20	36	31
21	33	29
Sex	No.	%
Male	94	82
Female	17	15
Not clearly recorded	4	3
Other	0	0
Race and ethnic category	No.	%
White	73	64
Black and minority ethnic	31	27
Other groups	4	4
Not clearly recorded	6	5
Does the person on probation have a disability?	No.	%
Yes	44	39
No	56	49
Not clear	14	12
Type of case being inspected?	No.	%
Licence	18	16
Post-sentence supervision	5	4
Community order	55	48
Suspended sentence order	30	26
Youth rehabilitation order	6	5
Section 91/250 custodial sentence	1	1