

# **"THEY DON'T HELP THE REAL LIFE PROBLEMS."**

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT IN YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICES

JUNE 2022

#### A MESSAGE FROM MARK

Are a good education, meaningful training and paid employment crucial to young people not re-offending? Many people would say yes. And much of the evidence would agree. That's why there has been such a focus on education, training and employment, especially for young people, in recent years. And that's why the Probation Inspectorate commissioned User Voice to get young peoples' insights.

What we heard, more importantly what we didn't hear, tells a different story. Yes, education, training and employment are important. But what are they not saying? What are they not able to tell us?

Over 90% had regular check ins with their youth offending team worker and the young people reported how 'nice' they were.

Yet the stats tell us that many of these young people will end up in prison, on probation, or homeless. Something doesn't add up.

Many reported being offered courses that "don't help real life problems", not addressing the reasons why they ended up in trouble with the law in the first place. Many will have experienced childhood trauma, abuse, neglect, poverty, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol problems. When I started User Voice, one of our first reports was 'The User Voice of learning and skills in prison'. Like the young people in this consultation, back in 2008 the majority of participants said getting a qualification was important. Yet, they stressed that the route to employment is a journey. That employability is not only about having the necessary qualifications – it is also about being ready for employment. To be employable young people need housing, social support and emotional stability.

And before undertaking education and training, they need to address any factors that would unbalance this – including drugs and alcohol dependency, family issues and mental health.

Their involvement with the youth offending service provides the opportunity to do this.

Let's not make this a missed opportunity.

MARK JOHNSON Founder, User Voice



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## **SUMMARY**

Children in the criminal justice system face many challenges that impact their progression through Education, Training and Employment (ETE). This report presents the experiences of twenty-nine children in six Youth Offending Services (YOS) across the UK. The main objectives of the research were to understand the challenges faced by children when trying to access ETE, to identify effective practice and to establish how services can achieve the best outcomes for children.

Overall, the children we spoke to had complex needs and chaotic personal lives, they were living in care, had substance misuse issues or were homeless. They also reported having learning difficulties, neurodivergent disorders and poor mental health. Anxiety was a key barrier preventing a number of the children from attending ETE, even when it was something that they genuinely wanted to do.

The children spoke of a desire to move on, they wanted to get a job or acquire a skill that they could use moving forward. However, many had a mediocre experience of ETE, with very little awareness of the ETE options, little choice in which ETE they did and no ETE plan to speak of.

The biggest issue for them, outside of their personal circumstances, was the lack of relevance or consideration for their skills, interests, abilities and circumstances. Despite a lack of relevance for many, 4 in 5 children we spoke to reported some benefit from engaging with ETE, and with the YOS more generally, particularly around soft skills. Many of the children did mention how 'nice' their YOS worker was and some reflected on the lengths they go to support them.

Children who had positive outcomes described not only a good relationship with their YOS worker, but also having a choice and being involved in decision making around ETE. These children had assessments and plans that they felt a part of, and their individual learning and personal needs were understood and catered to. They were developing skills in a number of areas, such as academic, behaviour and life skills, and reported feeling supported to achieve their goals.

## **USER VOICE**

User Voice is a nationwide UK charity created and run by people with lived experience of the criminal justice system. We exist to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in prisons, probation and youth offending services (YOS). We ensure they have the opportunity to be heard and to influence change.

User Voice operates elected Peer Councils and peer-led action research in prisons and the probation service throughout the UK. We give a voice to thousands of people in the criminal justice system each year, including nearly 23,000 in 2020 despite Covid-19 restrictions.

We are proud to enable children to voice their needs, to recognise their worth and to put forward their own solutions, created through experience.

We hope this report will promote greater understanding of the barriers to engagement in ETE for children in the justice system. Although it's clear that the problem and the solutions are 'bigger than the YOSs', we highlight the important measures that YOSs can take to help these children achieve their potential.



Young people in the criminal justice system often have additional or special educational needs such as learning disabilities (20% vs 2-3% of general population), ADHD (30% or 5 x higher than general population) and dyslexia (circa 50% vs 10% of general population).

This means that their educational needs are often not understood or catered to and this intersects with or contributes to their offending behaviour.

This report was commissioned by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) to explore children's experiences of the education, training and employment provision of youth offending services across England and Wales.

In particular we wanted to know:

- The challenges encountered by children and their families when trying to access education, training and employment
- What works well and identify effective practice
- How services can achieve the best outcomes for children

Through this consultation we were able to hear directly from children and present their unfiltered feedback to key decisionmakers responsible for managing youth offending services.

This consultation ensures that the evaluation of youth offending services is grounded in the experiences of the children attending those services. It is imperative that we better understand how children in the YOS can achieve their potential. To do this we must listen and act upon the insights provided by the children in this consultation.



#### **HOW WE FIND PARTICIPANTS**

Due to national lockdown restrictions, User Voice were not able to recruit individuals through our normal approach in most instances. This would have been to attend YOS's and directly engage with the children, explaining who User Voice are and the value of the consultation, before asking them to participate. We were able to conduct face-to-face engagement in just one YOS.

Instead, case managers were responsible for outlining the scope and purpose of the consultation to the children who then decided if they wished to participate. For those who consented to participate, contact details were then provided to our peer researchers who called the children to conduct semi-structured interviews.

Whilst this approach enabled the consultation under COVID-19 restrictions to take place it presented certain challenges. Primarily, it meant User Voice could not influence how many children were offered the option to participate in the inspection. User Voice were also reliant on the telephone numbers provided by the YOSs which were sometimes incorrect or unanswered when called.

#### ENGAGEMENT

Due to their lived experience of prison and probation, User Voice engagement staff are able to quickly and effectively build trusting relationships with service users. Through peer research, we are able to gain the perspective of service users, generating honest and authentic insight. This enables mutual service user and service provider collaboration, providing a positive experience for those who participate.

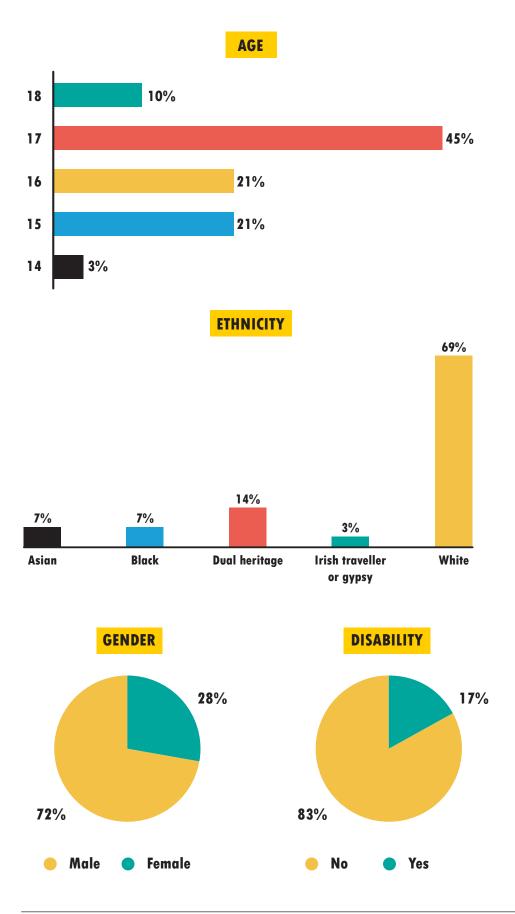
All peer researchers on this consultation had experience of the criminal justice system and a number of them had experience of youth offending services. Shared experience enables User Voice staff to connect with children and adopt a sensitive and informed approach.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with children in person, via telephone and by video call. Trained peer researchers engaged the children in conversation and recorded their responses.

We believed it was vital that we adopted a conversational interview approach which allowed our staff to discuss important topics of ETE with children. This approach ensured that rich, quality data was collected in a method that accommodated the specific needs of the children we engaged with.

## WHO WE SPOKE TO

We spoke to 29 children across 6 YOSs for this consultation. The demographics of those we engaged with are as follows:



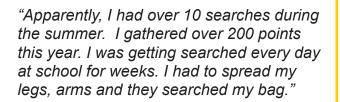
## CHALLENGES FACED BY CHILDREN

*"I have drink and drug problems and I'm sad."* 

The children we spoke to faced a raft of challenges in their personal lives, this included bereavement, living in care, substance misuse issues, homelessness, learning difficulties, neurodivergent disorders and poor mental health. One child was still very actively engaged in criminal activity and discussed being routinely searched in and outside of school. Another was in the process of transitioning to adult services and found the experience incredibly challenging.

"No not really, I have experienced everything you have just said (learning difficulties, homelessness, drugs, relationship/family issues, personality/ mental health disorders) and it has always been an issue for me but none of it is reasons for not being better. There wasn't much the YOT team could do for me really."

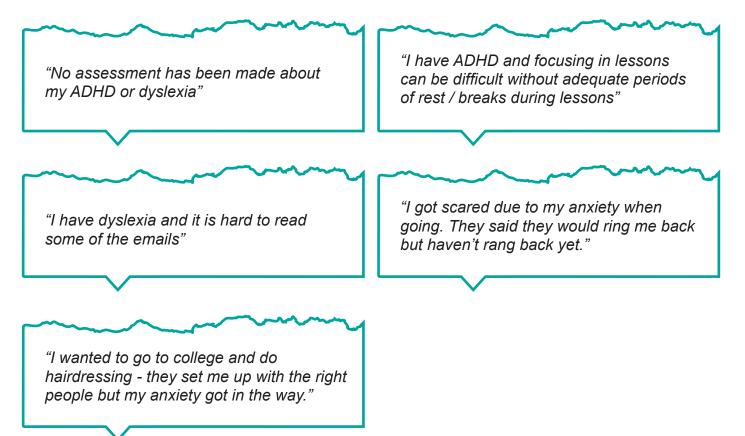
"XX is with the youth offending services and she's a probation officer, she works with both, so when I turn 18 I would have still stayed with her but she's moved on. It would have made a lot more sense to stay with her until the day I finish but now I'm basically gonna be all over the gaff, to different people, it wasn't what I was looking forward too, I had my mind set its gonna be cool." "I just moved xx, obviously I been with the YOT for like a few years, I been in an out of care, lived with my grandma, lost my grandad, lost my brother, lived with my other nan, my life has been hectic, my emotions all over the place. I'm never where someone wants me or not in the mood. But it doesn't seem like they are doing anything for me, nobody is doing shit unless its in the background and I don't know but as far as I'm aware nothing is happening".



## NEURODIVERSITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

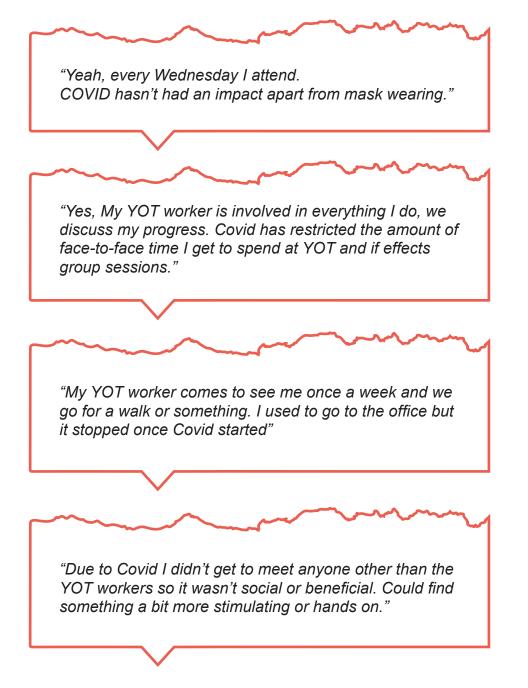
# 10 (34%) of the children reported that they had a neurodiverse condition or a mental health condition that impacted their engagement and experience with ETE.

At least two hadn't been assessed for learning difficulties. Others had been assessed but still didn't find their needs catered to. Anxiety was a key barrier preventing a number of the children from attending ETE, even when it was something that they genuinely wanted to do.





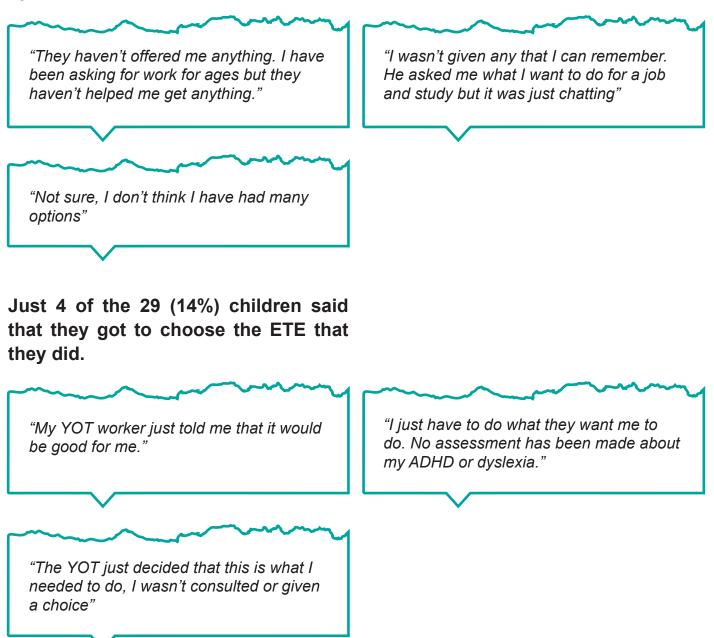
COVID-19 impacted the way in which the children interacted with ETE and their YOS worker. Mask wearing, telephone calls, online learning and quarantining have become the norm, however the social aspect of group sessions has been lost and missed.



## **CHOICE AND AGENCY**

The children we spoke to had very little awareness of the ETE options that were available to them. They didn't believe they had a choice in which ETE they did and few had an ETE plan that they were following or had knowledge of.

10 out of the 29 (34%) children didn't think they had been given any ETE options.



# 18 (62%) either did not have an ETE plan or didn't know if they had one.

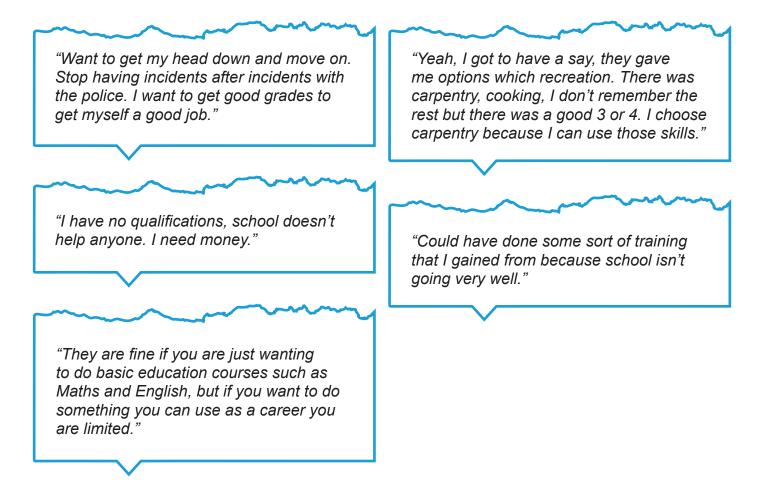
However, they believed a plan would be helpful to them. One child was very clear on the fact he had a plan but highlighted that he wasn't involved in the development of it.





## **CAREER ASPIRATIONS**

The children spoke of a desire to move on, they wanted to get a job or acquire a skill that they could use moving forward. School wasn't going very well for a number of the children and they felt that vocational training would have been a better option for them.



## RELEVANCE

"Rubbish. They don't help the real life problems."

Most of the children we spoke to were in some type of ETE at the time of interviewing. However, 8 (28%) children weren't involved in any ETE at all, two had refused the options they were offered and one was waiting to get into a course. 4 (14%) were completing basic numeracy and literacy courses, while 6 (21%) were in school or completing online schooling. The remaining children were completing practical courses such as carpentry, engineering maintenance and health and safety food courses. Two mentioned life skills and multi skills courses.

Overall, the children had mediocre experiences with ETE.

The biggest issue was the lack of relevance or consideration for their skills, interests, abilities and circumstances. Volunteering isn't seen as a viable option to children who need to support themselves financially. Those with neurodiverse conditions were repeatedly offered options that weren't suitable to them, while others were doing courses that were too easy to keep them interested.

As the children weren't included in assessments, weren't given a choice of ETE and didn't have an ETE plan, it's unsurprising that they feel the ETE they are doing isn't relevant to them.

I have no qualifications, school doesn't help anyone. I

need money"

"No one but CareersWales contacted me regarding ETE, and they literally just called to see how I was getting on. Offered me voluntary work but that's no good to me. It sounded good for maybe someone else my age but not me because of my dyslexia."

"Um I don't really know, they were good like but I'm more computer minded, I'm not best with English but trying to plan for lesson, I'm doing the work I'm given, lesson after lesson. I ask the teacher how I'm doing; all they say is your doing good, but I feel I'm not learning anything. Its bullshit!"

"I am dyslexic and it really affects the way I learn. I got kicked out of all my schools because I can't concentrate and I told YOT this but they didn't care and continues offering me school like group settings which obviously I declined. My mums helping me look for an online college course to do from home"

*"I have ADHD and focusing in lessons can be difficult without adequate periods of rest / breaks during lessons"* 

"They have offered me loads of shit like, Bernandos, alcohol and drugs help, CAMMS I think they referred me to. They have referred and asked me if I want this and that but they're just asking me if I want the wrong things."

## OTHER BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

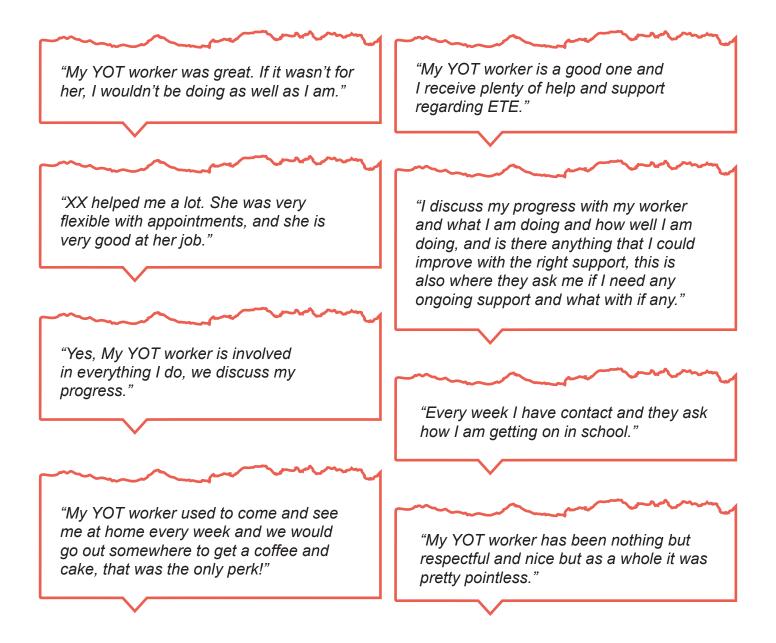
As mentioned earlier, anxiety is a key barrier for some children engaging with ETE. Other barriers include emotional issues and the timings of courses. A number of children discussed their inability to get up in the morning, whether due to sleep issues or lifestyle factors, they believed that their engagement with ETE would be better in the afternoon.



#### 93% had regular check-ins with their YOS worker.

These check-ins were considered helpful and supportive by some. Many of the children did mention how 'nice' their YOS worker is and some reflected on the lengths they go to support them. In certain cases, YOS workers were found to be flexible, respectful, and responsible for the positive changes the children had made recently.

However, despite these positive relationships, many believed that they received little benefit other than 'coffee and cake'. It shows that having a caring and supportive YOS worker isn't enough when it comes to the actual development of the children. In order to advance in areas of their lives such as education and work, the children need additional forms of support, which they are not getting.



"To be honest yeah, they haven't helped me at all. My YOT worker now xx yeah, is a good person yeah, she's a good YOT, she does everything she can to help me yeah, she asks me how I am, she makes sure I get to my court. She drives all the way from xx to xx and back again and all the way to mums just so I make it to court... I feel like there's not opportunities that come up, so say for drugs and violence yeah, no help is offered. They want to send me to like some gardening place, what a waste of time. They think they know what they're doing but they don't."

"Youth club! People who work there are so nice, easy to go to, they say don't smoke, don't vape, don't shout, don't swear but they are flexible with the rules. They help with fitness"



"The staff on the course were all really nice."

"YOT has helped me as a whole in making better life choices."

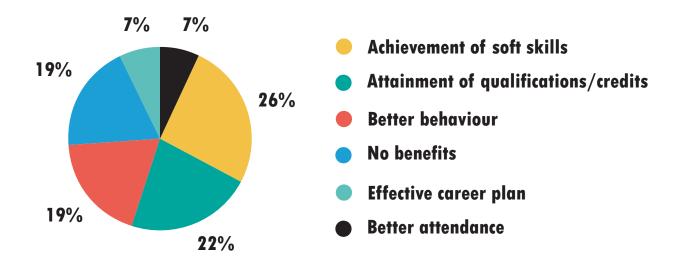
## **ACHIEVEMENTS**

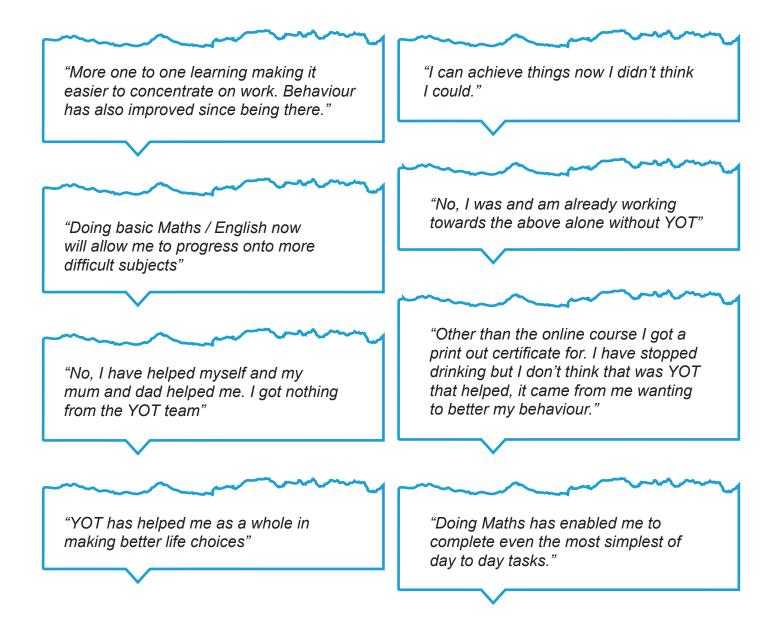
*"It didn't hinder me in anyway but it didn't benefit me in any way at all. I got off my order 3 months early for good behaviour!"* 

#### Despite a lack of relevance for many, 4 in 5 children we spoke to reported some benefit from engaging with ETE, and with the YOS more generally.

Most of these benefits were the acquirement of soft skills and better behaviour, however 6 attained qualifications and 2 reported better attendance.

Although developing a good YOS worker-child relationship is key to the child's development, more needs to be done in terms of the bigger picture of support and ETE.





## **GOOD PRACTICE**

#### **POSITIVE CASE STUDY**

One child stated that the YOS were "doing an amazing job" after she was "kicked out of mainstream school". She spoke of how she was supported by the YOS through "thick and thin".

She had been assessed for learning difficulties and **felt that she** had been involved in the process. Subsequently, she was transferred to a specialist school that "covers people with ADHD and learning difficulties". She felt that she was given ETE options, that she was included in the decision and supported at every stage. What really shone through was the YOS's ability to advocate for her educational needs and support her "through the rough times I have had throughout my journey".

She had **regular check-ins regardless of COVID-19** via phone or face-time and stated that "support carried on even if I couldn't have anyone round my house due to restrictions".

She was currently completing a number of different courses that covered academic, behavioural, and life skills. She was also completing a SPICE course which is designed for those with learning disabilities. She had high aspirations for her future and wanted to move on from her offending behaviour and "get good grades to get myself a good job". She reported **positive outcomes in the form of "better behaviour"** and said "I have improved so much since having YOT behind me".



#### ASSESSMENT AND ADJUSTMENT TO LEARNING ABILITY AND NEEDS

Some children did not feel as if they got a whole lot out of their time with the YOS. Below are suggestions or lessons from the children we spoke to.

Children need a better initial assessment of their needs prior to the development of their ETE plans. Many of their individual needs, such as ones arising from neurodiverse conditions, were not catered for.

"They could add regular breaks to sessions as in my own case I have ADHD and it is hard for me to stay focused for long periods of time, so my learning would be better if I had frequent breaks"

"They could only offer group work which is no good for me because I can't concentrate in groups. I have to be 121 or around people I know to learn new things"

"I don't think they have got it right the kids they decide to work with. Someone else could have really benefited from my guy once they had realized I don't have needs"



#### **INVOLVE CHILDREN IN ETE DECISIONS AND PLANS**

Children often weren't aware of their plans and wanted a better understanding of their plans and increased engagement with ETE. They want to be directly involved in the development of their own individual plans. This process, alongside a detailed initial assessment, will highlight what the child wants to get out of their time on ETE and how their plans can be adapted to best suit their interests and needs.



#### **RELEVANT ETE OPTIONS THAT ADDRESS THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES, INTERESTS AND ASPIRATIONS**

93% had regular check-ins with their YOS worker and remarked how 'nice' they were. Crucially though, underlying issues such as mental health and substance misuse weren't being addressed. Instead, the young people were being offered courses that had little benefit to them and "don't help real life problems".

Children want more choice for ETE. The current options seem limited and don't reflect the interests or aspirations of many children in Youth Justice Services. More independent engagement with children is encouraged, to discover what further options will best reflect their needs.

"I was at college and doing a picture my future thing that was a course so they can help you figure out what you want to do with your future. I told them over and over again what I want to do is music. I want to be a DJ, I want to do music and yet they just forced me to do something completely different and wonder why I wasn't interested. My mum even spoke to the college."

*"Just something I can do, keeps me off the streets and gives me some money in my hand legit"* 

"Driving awareness or something that is related. Not hit and miss conversations because they assume I have problems like other young offenders"

"There is no plan and school or volunteering won't help my life right now, I need money, I need to settle in a home and help my head."

#### **SUPPORT AND FLEXIBILITY**

It is clear that a supportive and flexible YOS worker creates a better environment for the development of children in Youth Justice Services and increases engagement with ETE. In order for all children to be able to gain valuable experiences from positive interactions, a review of what makes a supportive YOS worker is recommended as a way to tailor relevant training.



#### **LIVED EXPERIENCE**

Children want to interact more with people that understand them. They feel that YOS workers don't understand what it is like to have been in their shoes and therefore don't understand their daily lives and their issues. Hiring more YOS workers with lived experience will allow them to be more relatable and empathetic whilst having a good understanding of what kind of support the children need, both specific to ETE as well as in general.

"These people from uni don't get us, they get paid in set hours. Not they as in you because I know you been through shit. I can hear it like I can't even see your face but I can tell, I feel stupid not even knowing you but I know you get me but these guys want to give me advise they learnt from a book yeah, they go to college and uni, learn from the government and then they want to try and give me, don't ever give me advise yeah if you haven't lived it. You got more money and text books than truths or life experience. They would never call me after 5. They just act like they have to work with these snotty kids to pay their mortgage. I didn't ask for this shit, I didn't want it but they act like we enjoy it and are burdening them. I never bother talking to nobody like this because they just sit there. I know if they get me and I know you get me which is making me thrive of it, it makes me wanna tell you exactly how I'm feeling about everything"

"More younger workers in the service and more ethnic people. I would feel more comfortable as a black man if there were more black people in the service."





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