

Balancing the scales: Reimagining the role of family and youth justice in supporting children and families

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Introduction

Purpose of this paper

This paper explores the role of courts in the lives of families and children, with a particular focus on the family and youth justice systems. Criminal justice continues to dominate political debate and media coverage. This was most recently reflected in the government's spending review, which prioritised investment in criminal justice, including increased prison capacity. Meanwhile, the equally critical systems that shape the experiences and futures of vulnerable families – particularly those navigating domestic abuse, care proceedings, or youth offending – receive far less attention and investment.

This is not to say that these areas are static or lacking in innovation. On the contrary, there are many examples of creative, compassionate, and effective practice. But too often, this work happens without the full visibility or sustained investment needed to achieve system-wide impact.

This paper seeks to bring that work into the light. Drawing on Mutual Ventures' experience across public and private family law – including the **Department for Education's DFJ Trailblazers programme**, the **Private Law Pathfinder programme**, and wider children's services such as **Regional Care Cooperatives** and **Family Group Decision Making** initiatives – it examines how families engage with the justice system, the barriers they encounter in having their voices heard, and the missed opportunities to provide more joined-up, trauma-informed support.

By highlighting both the challenges and the promising practice already underway, the paper explores how family and youth justice can learn from one another and work more collaboratively. Ultimately, it argues for a rebalancing of justice reform priorities – bringing family and youth justice into the mainstream of policy debate and public investment.

Summary of findings

Given the significant overlap between the family and youth justice systems – most starkly illustrated by the “care to custody pipeline” – there is a clear need for better alignment and shared learning, ensuring more coherent and coordinated support for the most vulnerable children and families.

To achieve meaningful change, the se systems must work together. There is no simple solution to these complex challenges – but change is possible. This report highlights four essential conditions for progress. While none are new, there are already strong examples of innovation and good practice at both national and local levels that can be built upon and scaled to meet the challenge.

- ▼ First, **better data** is needed across both systems – not only to understand long-term outcomes but also to enable safe and effective data sharing between agencies.
- ▼ Second, **the voice of children and families** must be placed at the centre of decision-making, ensuring lived experience drives meaningful reform.
- ▼ Third, **governance and accountability** structures should be strengthened to support more joined-up leadership and clearer oversight.
- ▼ Finally, **trauma-informed and restorative approaches** – such as Family Drug and Alcohol Courts and Family Group Decision Making – should be expanded and embedded more widely to create a more compassionate and effective justice system.

Together, these actions can support the development of a more coherent, compassionate justice system – one that recognises the interconnectedness of children's experiences and works across boundaries to promote safety, stability, and hope for the future.

Context

Overview of the systems

Family justice system

Family justice focuses on keeping children safe and resolving disputes within families. This includes public law (care proceedings where the state intervenes to protect a child) and private law disputes (such as parental separation or contact arrangements). These cases are often complex, costly, and involve vulnerable families.

Family justice is delivered by a range of public bodies. The Department for Education oversees public law policy, while the Ministry of Justice leads on private law. Local authorities are responsible for child safeguarding and social work. Courts are administered by HMCTS, with cases heard by judges and magistrates. Cafcass (and Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advise courts on what is in a child's best interests. Legal representation is provided by solicitors and barristers, often funded by legal aid.



Youth justice system

The youth justice system serves children and young people aged 10 to 17 who come into conflict with the law. Its primary focus is on rehabilitation and reintegration, recognising that children should be treated differently from adults in the justice system. It aims to prevent offending and reduce reoffending through early intervention and tailored support.

The system is overseen by the Youth Justice Board (YJB), a non-departmental public body responsible for improving local youth justice services, addressing inequalities, and promoting the Child First approach. Local Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) are multi-agency partnerships made up of professionals from the police, probation, social care, health, and education, working directly with young people and their families.

Youth cases are usually heard in youth courts, less formal magistrates' courts without a jury. Serious cases may be escalated to the Crown Court. If bail is refused, young people may be placed in secure children's homes, secure training centres, or Young Offender Institutions (for boys), all of which have statutory duties to safeguard and promote their welfare.

Family and Youth Justice Reviews

The foundations of both systems were critically examined over a decade ago in two landmark reviews – the **2011 Family Justice Review** [1], led by David Norgrove, and the **2016 Youth Justice Review** [2], chaired by Charlie Taylor.

Each review provided in-depth analysis of the unique challenges facing their respective systems, many of which remain highly relevant today. While family and youth justice face distinct issues, both reviews also identified common systemic problems, outlined on the next page.

Shared challenges across the systems

While the youth and family justice systems serve different purposes, they face many of the same structural challenges, including:

Supporting vulnerable children and families: Both systems work with vulnerable groups. The Youth Justice Review points to the overrepresentation of vulnerable groups, including those with mental health issues or learning difficulties. Similarly, the family justice deals with families in crisis, especially in care proceedings and cases involving domestic abuse. In both systems, there are concerns about whether services fully understand and are able to respond to these complex needs.

Pressure on resources: Both reviews highlight issues with resources. Within the youth justice system, gaps are reported in the provision of mental health support and education in custody driven by both workforce shortages and a lack of coordinated service delivery across health, education, and justice. In family justice, delays and backlogs, especially in public law cases, are reported due to limited resources and a stretched workforce, raising wider concerns about how services are funded and organised.

Inequitable impacts: Both the youth and family justice systems disproportionately impact children and young people of colour. Black children and adults are overrepresented in care proceedings [3], and in 2022–23, Black children accounted for 20% of stop and searches; were five times more likely to be arrested than white children; and made up 26% of the youth custody population, despite accounting for just 6% of the child population [4]. These figures highlight systemic bias and inequality across both systems.

Delays impacting outcomes: Long waits for support or legal decisions are a major issue in both systems. In youth justice, delays in receiving mental health aid or support after custody can lead to worse outcomes for young people. In family justice, children can be left in uncertain or at-risk situations while waiting for decisions to be made about their future, impacting both the children's mental and emotional wellbeing and development.

Fragmented services: Both the youth justice and family justice systems are characterised by fragmented services and poor coordination between key agencies. In family justice, disjointed working between courts, local authorities, Cafcass, and other agencies can lead to inefficiencies and inconsistent experiences for children and families. Similarly, in youth justice, a lack of cohesion across health, education, and social care can result in inconsistent support for vulnerable children, many of whom face barriers to accessing timely, appropriate services due to high thresholds and inflexible models of delivery. Both reviews call for more joined-up working across the systems with the Youth Justice Review stressing the importance of local services working together, including across health, education, and justice. Similarly, the Family Justice Review recommended improving coordination between agencies to better meet the needs of children and families and called for more holistic, integrated approaches.



System overlap

The family, youth and criminal justice systems do not operate in silo from one another.

A primary aim of both the family and youth justice systems is to support the wellbeing of children and young people. However, involvement in both systems can be a source of trauma for many young people. As such, there has been an attempt in recent years to move towards a more trauma-informed approach.

Furthermore, it is well-evidenced that children who have been in care system - especially those placed into the care of their local authority - are more likely to become involved in the youth justice and criminal justice systems. These overlaps reflect a pattern often referred to as the '**care to custody**' pipeline [5].

There is a disproportionate overrepresentation of children in care within the youth and criminal justice systems in England and Wales. One in three care-experienced children receive a youth justice caution or conviction between the ages of 10 and 17, compared to just 4% of children who had not been in care [6].

The Prison Reform Trust also notes that about 25% of adult prisoners have spent time in care [5].

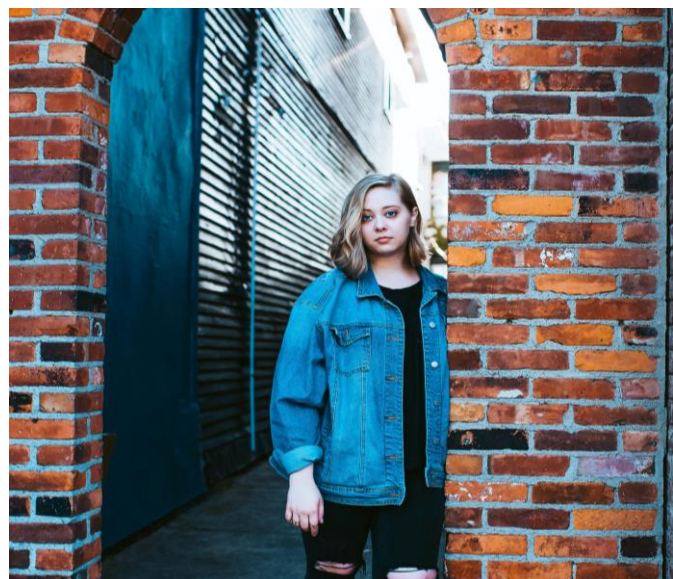
Furthermore, there is notable criminalisation of children in care through the criminalisation of behaviours that would not have brought police attention in other home settings [7].

Risk factors for families and children in the family justice system – specifically a lack of stable caregiving relationships and placements, exposure to abuse and neglect, poverty and housing insecurity – are also shared by the youth and criminal justice systems.

Many families and children have experienced abuse, neglect or significant trauma, which without trauma-informed support increases the risk of individuals acting out or self-destructive behaviour – which then escalates to the criminalisation of behaviour that would not normally lead to legal action in a stable family setting.

Without intervention, children's social care will continue to unintentionally funnel vulnerable adults and young people towards punitive systems, placing further strain on systems which should only be used where it is absolutely necessary and proportionate to proceed with legal action.

Disrupting the pipeline is not only necessary, but possible – but it requires a coordinated effort across children's social care, family justice, and the youth and criminal justice systems to collectively address the systems' shared challenges. There have therefore been increasing calls for closer integration between these systems.



There is a disproportionate overrepresentation of children in care within the youth justice system:

33%

care-experienced children who receive a youth justice caution or conviction between the ages of 10 and 17

4%

children not in care who receive a youth justice caution or conviction between the ages of 10 and 17 [6]



Case study: System overlap

Ryan Clark's story exemplifies how the shared challenges across the family, youth and criminal justice systems - and how failures to recognise how issues in one system will affect the others - can have serious and devastating real-world consequences.

Ryan was a Child Looked After, who had been in care with Leeds City Council since he was 16 months old. It was later noted that he had not had stable placements from the age of 13.

Ryan was placed on remand at Wetherby Young Offenders Institution (YOI) after being arrested on suspicion of two robberies. However, the extent of his vulnerability was not picked up on from relevant documents. In addition, not all support that could have been available for him was provided - including the personal officer scheme, where an officer is allocated to a young offender on arrival in custody to provide support. Although he was subjected to verbal abuse and physical threats from other inmates, the YOI's scheme to address bullying and intimidation was ineffective. He took his own life after 20 days.

The Independent Chair of the Leeds Safeguarding Board later stated that the system had failed him as a Child Looked After - and that during the last 12 months of his life there was no single consistent professional responsible for him, his housing situation prior to his remand was unstable, his care plan was insufficient, and he had been treated as 'troublesome' rather than troubled, vulnerable and emotionally damaged.

Behind the data

Though the two systems have different purposes which in turn leads to differences in the measurement of cases and case volume, both engage with significant numbers of children each year.

Volume

In the year ending March 2024, the youth justice system in England had a total of 12,900 sentencing occasions (8% increase from previous year) [8]. In the same time period, the family justice system in England had 11,450 care applications within public law (4% decrease from previous year) [9].

Timescales

Though the volume of applications or sentencing occasions is largely similar there is a stark difference in the average duration of cases between the two systems. When comparing English average durations of the two systems, the average time to resolve cases was 32 weeks [8] in the youth justice system, and 44 weeks within public law in the family justice system [9]. It is important to note there are considerable regional variation in both systems, with some areas experiencing significantly shorter, or longer case durations than others, reflecting local differences in resources, case complexity, and court capacity.

The disparity in average timescales between youth court sentences and family justice care proceedings reflects fundamental differences in the nature and complexity of the cases

managed by each system. Care proceedings typically involve complex welfare concerns that require extensive, multi-agency assessments of a child's needs, parental capacity, and placement options. These cases often focus on determining long-term plans for a child's future, which introduces additional administrative, legal and social complexity. Although the Public Law Outline (PLO) sets a statutory target of 26 weeks for completing care proceedings [10], this is frequently exceeded due to systemic pressures such as limited resources, increased complexity of cases, the need for viability assessments of extended family members, and delays in court listings.

By contrast, youth court proceedings are generally more focused on determining guilt or innocence in relation to a specific offence and delivering a sentence. While welfare considerations are still relevant, the process is more narrowly focused, and the legal threshold differs from family court: care proceedings require proving a child is at risk to suffer harm through complex, longitudinal evidence, whereas youth courts operate on the basis of proving a criminal offence beyond reasonable doubt.

Although timescales in the youth justice system have also increased due to greater case complexity and pandemic-related backlogs, the average duration of youth court cases remains shorter than care proceedings, reflecting the complexities and requirements of each system.

YOUTH JUSTICE

12,900 

sentencing occasions in March 2024
(8% increase from previous year) [8]

32 weeks 

average time to resolve cases [8]

FAMILY JUSTICE

11,450 

public law care applications in March 2024
(4% decrease from previous year) [9]

44 weeks 

average time to resolve cases [9]

Outcomes

A significant concern within the youth justice system is the increasing rate of reoffending among young offenders, which sits at 32.5% (March 2024), and marks the second consecutive year-on-year increase [11].

In addition, young people who have had contact with the youth justice system are more likely to experience poorer long-term outcomes, including higher rates of being not in education, employment, or training (NEET) and increased prevalence of mental health issues compared to their peers.

Measuring the long-term outcomes of children involved in care proceedings poses many challenges due to limited longitudinal data, inconsistent measurement and recordings practices, and the added complexity of tracking individuals over time.

Existing research indicates that individuals who experienced care proceedings often face significantly poorer outcomes than their peers, including higher rates of early mortality, poorer physical and mental health, lower educational attainment, greater socioeconomic disadvantage, increased involvement in the criminal justice system, and difficulties forming stable relationships.

A 2023 study reported nearly one-third (28.6%) of care leavers were found to be not in education, employment or training (NEETs) compared to just 2.4% of a comparable age group [12].

It is important to note not all children involved in care proceedings experience these outcomes, however, the current evidence highlights the need for improved data collection and long-term support to improve opportunities and outcomes.

Data availability and sharing

A significant barrier to understanding the full sustained impact of a child's journey through the justice system is the limited data availability and sharing between the youth and family justice systems. This lack of integrated data hinders the ability to track children who may move between these systems or have experiences in both. In addition, there is a lack of national data on youth crime prevention programmes and associated outcomes, which hinders the recognition and therefore future funding of these important initiatives.

Challenges in measuring long-term outcomes for children who have come in contact with the family justice system remains a challenge which limits the ability to understand the lasting impact of care proceedings. Data collection within the family justice system itself is fragmented, with data collected across multiple agencies, and a lack of data sharing, which complicates maintaining a complete and comprehensive picture.

The absence of shared data limits the ability to monitor the performance of both justice systems in achieving positive outcomes for vulnerable children. Without the ability to track children's journeys and outcomes across the systems, accountability becomes blurred as there is no way to hold agencies to account. In addition, the lack of robust data creates a challenge in proactively identifying trends or inequalities within the systems, therefore limiting the agility of the systems to respond to these.

28.6% 

of care leavers were found to be NEET [12]

Case study: Improving practice through improved data, Guildford

Context: Surrey County Council, within the Guildford DFJ area throughout MV's DFJ Trailblazers programme, identified that inaccurate and inconsistent data entry across systems was distorting their view of pre-proceedings timelines.

A review of their Public Law Outline (PLO) tracker revealed that many cases appeared longer than they were, largely because social workers weren't formally closing records. This produced misleading performance data.

In response, Guildford refined its data collection processes, aligning the social work case management system with legal and managerial trackers.

By creating a single, shared tracker which team managers are required to update, they improved data quality, supported clearer decision-making, and enabled better coordination across teams.

Key lessons:

- ▼ Data accuracy matters: Simple administrative issues (e.g. not closing a case) can significantly distort performance data and strategic decision-making.
- ▼ Importance of integrated systems and data sharing : Aligning legal and social work data allowed for more efficient case management and reduced unnecessary interventions.
- ▼ Collaboration improves outcomes: Joint working between social work and legal teams in alignment with partners like HMCTS enhanced communication and timeliness, directly benefiting families.
- ▼ Reliable tracking supports better decisions: Clearer data on case duration and urgency helped with smarter resource allocation and improved service delivery.



Voice and influence

Hearing and responding to the voices of those involved in the youth, criminal, and family justice systems is not a ‘nice to have’ – it is essential. When individuals feel genuinely heard, supported, and understood, even the most difficult experiences can include moments of dignity and validation. Participation, when meaningful and embedded, improves outcomes, builds trust, and supports better decision-making. International guidance and growing UK-based evidence reinforce this: **participation is most effective when it is a core, integrated component of how justice systems operate** – not an add-on or afterthought.

Yet this is not always the reality. The system often struggles to engage families on equal footing, particularly those who have experienced trauma, discrimination, or disadvantage. Families navigating care proceedings, contact disputes, or protective interventions frequently report feeling unheard, misrepresented, and overwhelmed. Decisions can feel rushed, leaving parents feeling pressured and unprepared.

One of the mothers interviewed for the ‘[Case stories](#)’ report on the DFJ Trailblazers pilot programme described being asked to sign a Section 20 agreement **"immediately after giving birth"**, while she was still in hospital and recovering from the birth.

She stated: **"I wasn't given any time to rest or even think about the decision. I felt rushed and overwhelmed, like I had to do it, but I didn't really understand what it meant at the time."**

Courtroom arrangements can also be insensitive to trauma histories. For example, mothers reported being required to sit with abusive ex-partners.

"I was forced to sit with my baby's father in the courtroom. His family were all there too, and I had no one. It was such an incredibly uncomfortable and intimidating experience."

Professionals across the family justice system – including social workers, Cafcass staff, and the judiciary – frequently express a desire to better incorporate the views and experiences of families and children. They are often deeply moved when they hear directly from parents or advocates sharing their stories. Where young people and parents have felt heard and supported, and their needs meaningfully considered, their experience – despite being distressing – can hold positive and even empowering memories.

However, **it is not enough to simply create space for participation. Professionals must also be equipped with the trauma-informed knowledge and relational skills needed to engage safely and effectively with vulnerable individuals.** This includes the ability to listen with care, understand different forms of communication, and reflect those views meaningfully in decisions and outcomes.

This leads to key questions we must ask across the system:

- ▼ What are the barriers preventing families and children from influencing decisions that affect them?
- ▼ How are their voices currently heard – and where are they being lost or ignored?
- ▼ What role can advocacy, co-design, and trauma-informed systems play in enabling – or, if done poorly, suppressing – those voices?

If we are serious about building a justice system that supports, rather than harms, vulnerable families and children, these questions must be central to how we work, how we design services, and how we measure success.

These are clear examples of what 'bad' looks like. But what about what 'good' looks like, and what should we learn from this?

There are several promising models that demonstrate what works when participation is built into justice processes, and better trauma knowledge and awareness sits alongside this.



Case Study: Workforce development in Durham County Council

Durham County Council (DCC) has taken a comprehensive approach to embed trauma-informed practice across its social care workforce, with a strong emphasis on understanding and responding to coercive control and domestic abuse. Central to this effort is the inclusion of lived experience, particularly from women in County Durham. We worked with DCC to develop this case study for this report.

DCC recognised the need for all training, tools and documents across relevant services to stress the importance of not engaging in victim blaming.

DCC partnered with the national charity Pause and the Open Clasp Theatre Company. Their powerful productions - *Rattlesnake*, *Lasagna*, and *Alisha's Story* - brought real-life experiences of coercive control and child removal into the training room. These workshops encouraged practitioners to reflect deeply; *Lasagna*, a filmed play (sponsored by Pause) based on the true-life experiences of women who have lost children to the care system, following by a workshop where professionals can explore and reflect on the barriers birth families face (including the ongoing impact of coercive control), has become a cornerstone of domestic abuse training across the county. It is also not just for frontline staff – DCC have placed huge importance on staff across all levels attending this training, from senior leaders to Independent Reviewing Officers and team managers.

DCC also invested in expert-led learning. Professor Jane Monckton Smith – a leading criminologist and domestic homicide specialist – has delivered homicide timeline training to help staff understand how coercive control escalates; this is complemented by the DAPS 1–3 training framework, which builds practitioner confidence from basic awareness to advanced relational work with families experiencing trauma.

Critically, this comprehensive workforce development approach is not a one-off event. It was embedded in practice through updated toolkits, a practitioner's guide to coercive control, and reflective sessions. Staff can – and have – attended training sessions more than once, and have reflected that they learn something new each time.

Around 5000 course attendances have now been recorded. All managers have a clear and consistent approach when overseeing and agreeing plans for families who are victims of domestic abuse. There is recognition of coercive and controlling behaviour which is evidenced within assessments and care plans. Staff are seen as being kind in how they write about domestic abuse, with emphasis on the actions of the perpetrator rather than the victim, and there is evidence of mapping of risk in line with the domestic homicide timeline.

Durham's approach has been praised as "trailblazing" by Domestic Abuse Commissioner Nicole Jacobs. The council has also achieved White Ribbon accreditation for its efforts and commitment to ending male violence against women.

Durham County Council's journey shows what's possible when lived experience and creative training come together. What makes this even more impactful, is when it is combined with systemic reform and the voices of lived experience are incorporated throughout the process.

What could this look like at a national level?

Case Study: Private Law Pathfinder

In England and Wales, the Private Law Pathfinder [13] will be a critical model for rolling out a whole-system approach for embedding participation across a process from end to end, including ensuring children's voices are central in decisions about their care and protection.

The Pathfinder pilot programme explores non-adversarial and problem-solving approaches to resolving disputes in family courts. It aims to:

1. Ensure that risks, particularly regarding domestic abuse, are assessed earlier and are better understood – including providing expert domestic abuse support and advice to victim-survivors, to reduce the re-traumatisation of domestic abuse survivors and children during proceedings.
2. Improve the family court experience for all parties, especially parent survivors of domestic abuse and their children, by reducing conflict within proceedings and enhancing children's participation by putting children at the centre of proceedings.
3. Adopt a multi-agency and whole-system approach to improve coordination between the family court and agencies like local authorities, the police, and specialist domestic abuse support providers.
4. Deliver a more efficient court process, reducing delays and requiring fewer hearings, including reducing the number of returning cases.

Although the Pathfinder programme sits within the private law space, it shares many similarities and transferrable lessons with pilots in the public law space such as DFJ Trailblazers.

Working in this way would be a comprehensive shift in practice for all stages of care proceedings – and in combination with greater skills and capability in professionals across the family justice system, has huge potential to reduce harm, improve child participation, and enhance outcomes by embedding relational, emotionally safe processes. Rolled out on a national footprint, this could be a game-changer.

The case is clear:

- ▼ Participation must be embedded as a core design principle – not offered as an afterthought or box-ticking exercise.
- ▼ Deep trauma-informed training for professionals, and increased professional confidence, are vital to ensuring that participation is safe, meaningful, and effective.
- ▼ Advocacy and representation are lifelines. When families and children are supported to understand, express, and influence outcomes, engagement between professionals and families becomes more just and effective.
- ▼ Promising models exist, and they offer blueprints for integrated, participatory, and emotionally intelligent family justice processes.

Governance and accountability

The governance of family justice and youth justice in England operates through distinct frameworks, reflecting the different legal, cultural, and operational context of the two systems. However, both systems deal with highly vulnerable children and families, and there is growing recognition of the overlap in the challenges they face and the opportunities for shared learning and collaboration. A closer examination of their governance structures at both central and local levels reveals important similarities and differences – as well as potential areas for reform.

Central level governance arrangements

At the central level, family justice is overseen primarily by the MoJ (responsible for private law) and the DfE (responsible for public law). The Family Justice Board (FJB), co-chaired by the MoJ and the DfE, brings together representation from the key stakeholder organisations, such as Cafcass, HMCTS, the judiciary, local government, and others, with a focus on cross-agency coordination and performance oversight. However, the **family justice system is often described as fragmented, with no single accountable body and limited levers for influencing local delivery**. This creates challenges in aligning strategic priorities across agencies and implementing change consistently on the ground.

National Audit Office on governance arrangements in family justice

The FJB met on average 2.5 times per year between June 2018 and December 2024. There has been frequent turnover in its ministerial chairs, with each minister attending only three meetings on average, resulting in a lack of consistent political leadership and frequent refocusing of the FJB's priorities. [14]

By contrast, youth justice governance is more consolidated. The Youth Justice Board (YJB) is a statutory, non-departmental public body accountable to the MoJ. It has national oversight of youth justice and sets standards, gathers and publishes data, and distributes funding to Youth Justice Services. Local authorities are responsible for operational delivery through Youth Justice Partnerships, typically embedded within multi-agency Youth Justice Services, which include representatives from police, health, education, and social care. This gives the YJB clearer levers to influence local practice, supported by statutory duties and inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation. The system operates more like a network of aligned partnerships with shared goals, though it too faces pressures related to funding, increasing complexity of cases, and variation in local performance.

Local level governance arrangements

Locally, the family justice system is supported by Local Family Justice Boards (LFJBs), which bring together local leaders from the judiciary, local authorities, Cafcass, and other partners to support improved coordination and case progression. However, **LFJBs are non-statutory bodies and are not accountable to the FJB. They have no formal powers or funding, and their effectiveness depends largely on the commitment and leadership of local stakeholders**, particularly the Designated Family Judge. This can limit their effectiveness.

Youth Justice Services, in contrast, are underpinned by statutory Youth Justice Plans, produced by local authorities and signed off by the YJB. This creates a more formal mechanism for local accountability and strategic planning, with clearer expectations about multi-agency working and performance monitoring.

Youth Justice Services often have a strong culture of data-driven improvement, supported by YJB toolkits and frameworks such as AssetPlus. They are also more likely to include specialist roles for education, health, and speech and language therapy, helping to address the broader needs of young people in the system.

Lessons for both systems

A comparison of the two systems highlights opportunities for mutual learning and closer collaboration. One clear area is governance and performance oversight. **The family justice system could benefit from clearer national accountability structures** and greater use of performance data and local planning tools. The YJB model – with its blend of national leadership and local accountability – offers a more coherent framework that could inspire reforms in family justice, particularly around local partnerships and multidisciplinary approaches.

Equally, **youth justice could learn from the family justice system’s deep legal expertise, its focus on children’s rights, and its structured approach to judicial decision-making**. Family courts offer a formal and consistent process for safeguarding decisions, which can sometimes be missing in youth justice when children’s welfare needs are not adequately addressed outside of offending behaviours.

There is also an argument for **stronger joint working between LFJBs and local Youth Justice Services**. Many children are known to both systems – moving between care proceedings, youth offending, and sometimes criminal exploitation. Yet too often these systems operate in parallel, with limited information sharing or joint planning. Better alignment of LFJBs and Youth Justice Management Boards, perhaps through joint sub-groups or shared data sets, could help identify children at risk earlier and provide more coordinated support.

Governance and accountability: comparison

Aspect	Family justice system	Youth justice system
Central governance	MoJ and DfE oversight; Family Justice Board (non-statutory, cross-agency)	Youth Justice Board (statutory non-departmental public body under MoJ)
Local governance	Local Family Justice Boards (non-statutory, no formal powers)	Youth Justice Services and Management Boards (statutory, multi-agency, accountable to local authority)
Accountability mechanisms	Judicial independence limits accountability levers; performance data limited in scope	Stronger performance monitoring; YJB sets standards, inspects, and allocates funding
Partnership working	Variable; often limited to legal and social care partners	Embedded in delivery; includes police, education, health, and social care
Use of data and planning tools	Patchy; limited local planning responsibilities	Strong use of data and planning frameworks (e.g. AssetPlus, statutory Youth Justice Plans)
Judicial role	Central to system leadership and decision-making	Present in youth courts, but less dominant in local governance
Opportunities	Opportunity for better alignment with youth justice on shared children and themes (e.g. exploitation)	Could benefit from family justice’s structured safeguarding processes and trauma-informed practice

Alternative approaches and innovation

In both family justice and youth justice systems, there has been a marked growth in practices emphasising trauma-informed and restorative justice approaches.

The role of Group Decision Making

Family justice system

Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) is a restorative and participatory approach that is commonly used in the family justice system. It is designed to empower families to take an active role in resolving issues that affect the safety and welfare of children, young people, and vulnerable adults. FGDM represents a shift towards more inclusive, collaborative, and restorative practices in social care and justice.

The process draws on the strengths and resources of the wider family network, acknowledging that, where it is safe and appropriate, children should remain within their own families rather than enter local authority care. Evidence suggests that these processes can lead to improved outcomes for children and young people, greater family engagement, and significant cost savings for local authorities. By centering the voices of families and supporting them to take ownership of their plans, it offers a powerful alternative to more adversarial or top-down decision-making processes.

FGDM is not a one-size-fits-all model; it can take various forms depending on the context and needs of the family. One of the most common and well-established models is Family Group Conferencing (FGC), which involves a structured, facilitated meeting between the child or young person, their extended family, and relevant professionals, followed by private family time to formulate a plan. It builds on the family's existing strengths and relationships, rather than focusing solely on deficits or risks.

Youth justice system

While group decision-making is more formally established in the family justice system, there are parallels with restorative practices in youth justice. In youth justice, restorative approaches bring together the young offending person, the victim, their family members (if appropriate), and professionals to discuss the harm caused and agree on a way forward. These meetings are always voluntary and aim to promote accountability, healing, and reparation.

Although Family Group Conferences (FGCs) are not widely used across the youth justice system in England and Wales, there are notable exceptions. For example, the Leeds ReConnect project, launched in 2012, supports young people at risk of reoffending via a 'pure' FGC model, including voluntary referrals, neutral venues, and private extended -family time. The project also includes restorative discussions focused on repairing relationships and improving communication within families. These meetings have been especially helpful in cases involving family conflict or intra-familial harm [15].

Case Study: Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, 'youth conferences' are a statutory element of the youth justice system and are used in 80% of youth justice cases [15]. In these youth conferences, the victim, offender, and their families work together to develop a plan to repair the harm to the victim and to address the young person's offending behaviour.

While youth conference-based restorative justice approaches have shown promise, research on their effectiveness varies. Some studies report reductions in reoffending ranging from 7% to 77%, and victim satisfaction rates as high as 85% [15]. However, there is ongoing debate about its suitability for high-risk cases, especially those involving serious or repeated offences.

Problem-solving, restorative, and preventative approaches

While the UK does not currently operate dedicated drug and alcohol courts for young people, the youth justice system has embraced a range of creative, problem-solving approaches aimed at supporting rehabilitation and reducing reoffending.

Case Study: Family Drug and Alcohol Courts

In the family justice system, Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) offer a therapeutic approach to care proceedings for parents with complex needs, particularly those struggling with substance misuse. FDACs operate under the same legal framework as standard care cases but differ in their practice model. In FDACs, an independent, multi-disciplinary team provides intensive therapeutic assessment and support, while a specially trained judge takes a hands-on approach, meeting with families regularly to guide their progress.

Research has shown that FDACs are effective in helping parents cease substance misuse and reunite with their children. Additionally, FDACs have been found to generate direct benefit savings of £74,068 per case compared to standard care proceedings [16]. They can also help to alleviate strain on wider public services, including health services and the criminal justice system, due to reduced long-term need for drug treatment and lower rates of drug-related crime.

Case Study: Southwark YJS

Crest Insights' 2024 report, developed in partnership with Lancashire and Southwark Youth Justice Services, offers compelling examples of trauma-informed practice in action. One standout case comes from Southwark, where a young person participated in workshops led by RoadWorks Media. Drawing on their passion for rap, they wrote and performed a poem inspired by their experience of relocating to a new area. This creative outlet fostered a sense of ownership and self-expression, which the young person described as their proudest achievement while in the service—crediting it with helping them manage anger more constructively [17].

Examples of restorative practice in youth justice include a young person in Lancashire who completed a local placement as an assistant theatre manager, sparking an interest in the arts [17]. Across England and Wales, the Youth Justice Board's Resource Hub highlights initiatives such as the Whispers Equine Assisted Learning Programme in Wales and the Sown and Grown allotment project in Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly, both of which promote emotional resilience and wellbeing through restorative, nature-based approaches [18]. The London-based Bambu Project provides trauma-informed play therapy and family sessions for young people affected by domestic abuse [19].

These **examples highlight the value of personalised, strengths-based approaches that engage young people in meaningful activities**. By focusing on creativity, responsibility, and emotional development, such programmes offer promising alternatives to traditional punitive responses.

Cross-system collaboration

Lasting change is difficult to achieve by simply introducing initiatives into local areas. Impact is greatest when these efforts are embedded within a coordinated, multi-agency system, where cross-sector partners collaborate effectively, share governance, and are united by a common purpose and shared accountability for outcomes.

To address this, at the national level, the government has committed to the Young Futures programme, which aims to establish local hubs offering multidisciplinary support to young people. These hubs will bring together youth workers, mental health professionals, and careers advisers to help young people stay engaged in the community and avoid involvement in crime [20]. Similar hub models, including No Wrong Door, which supports young people in care or on the edge of care, have proved effective in reducing offending and improving outcomes for young people [21].

Despite these pockets of good practice, there is still room for greater and more conscious integration among the wider justice systems and other services, including the care system. The fact that care-experienced children remain significantly overrepresented in the youth justice system suggests that continued investment in integrated, trauma-informed, and community-based responses is

Case Study: Greater Manchester RCC Remand Pilot [22]

The Greater Manchester Regional Care Cooperative is piloting a remand programme, which aims to provide alternatives to custodial remand for children across the region.

Within this pilot, Greater Manchester is developing residential properties for 16–17-year-olds with independent living skills who would otherwise be placed in secure detention settings, which can be traumatic for young people and have faced criticism for focusing too heavily on punishment rather than rehabilitation.

The programme also focuses on areas such as remand fostering, supported accommodation, education, judicial engagement, and amplifying the voice of the child.

Since the pilot began, the number of remands has decreased, and the proportion of young people who do not reoffend within a year of release has risen from 23% to 45%. As of March 2025, Greater Manchester had seen 8 consecutive months of decreasing costs associated with the pilot. The financial savings generated can be reinvested into early intervention, specialist provision, and community-based alternatives [22].



Conclusion

The family and youth justice systems are structurally and operationally distinct, reflecting their different legal foundations, professional cultures, and institutional histories. However, they often interact the same children and families – those most vulnerable to harm, exclusion, and systemic disadvantage.

Nowhere is this overlap more evident than in the persistent "care to custody" pipeline, through which children involved in the care system disproportionately go on to come into contact with the youth or criminal justice system. Outcomes for children remain stark, with many leaving both systems not in education, employment or training, and facing continued marginalisation.

Disrupting this pipeline requires a coordinated and sustained effort across family justice, youth justice, children's social care, and education.

There is growing recognition of the need to move beyond siloed interventions, with increasing calls to bring family and youth justice closer together in policy, governance, and practice. Yet despite this momentum, progress remains uneven.

At the same time, there is real learning and innovation to build on – from the success of FDACs in supporting parents to address underlying issues, to FGDM models that empower families and reduce adversarial processes. Such approaches could usefully be expanded across both family and youth justice to offer more humane, relationship-based pathways.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen data collection and sharing:** Both the family and youth justice systems need better, more consistent data on outcomes, particularly long-term measures such as education, employment, health, and housing. There must also be mechanisms for safely sharing data between systems to understand overlap, track pathways, and design coordinated interventions.
2. **Centre the voices of children, young people, and families:** System reform must be grounded in the lived experiences of those it is meant to serve. Both systems should build participatory models of service design, delivery, and evaluation—ensuring that children and families are not only heard but actively shape the responses they receive.
3. **Improve governance and accountability:** Governance arrangements at local and national levels must promote joint planning and oversight across systems. This could include better alignment between Local Family Justice Boards and Youth Justice Boards, stronger links with safeguarding and education partnerships, and clearer mechanisms for cross-agency accountability.
4. **Continue to embed and expand trauma-informed, restorative approaches:** Innovations such as FDACs, other problem-solving courts, and FGDM have shown promise in both improving outcomes and reducing system demand. These approaches should continue to be mainstreamed in family justice and also adapted for wider use in both youth justice settings, with appropriate investment in training, evaluation, and infrastructure.

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