CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

The Children's Commissioner's plan to transform education in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs)

November 2026

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



As Children's Commissioner, I speak to the victims of the gravest crimes.

So often they have been completely failed. By the police, by the courts, and by the wider services they need to rebuild their lives. I have heard from those children, time and again, that what they want is for the justice system to ensure that no one else has to suffer the way they have, that those who have committed those crimes don't go on to do it again.

We owe it to those children to ensure that we do not allow young offenders to become adult criminals. These children have broken the law, yes, but they are capable of great change - the courts have defined their sentence, but they need not define their life.

What we place before them in these years, whether a book or a blank wall, whether an expectation of excellence or a shrug of resignation, will do much to determine which story they go on to tell. I believe, for reasons both practical and moral, that we must give these children the best chance we can at achieving a better life.

That is why I welcomed the chance to conduct this Review at the request of the Youth Justice Minister.

On any given day, around 300 children are held in one of England's Young Offender Institutions.[1] One would hope that once there, they are educated – indeed, given the best education possible. Despite their crimes, they are children who have a right to education.

Instead, as report after report has demonstrated, these children are systematically and utterly failed.

Too many reviews and bit-part reforms have taken place. Too often, we have looked at a failing system and asked how we can improve it *somewhat*. We have called for more reviews, rather than acted, and all the while children have continued to receive substandard education. My review does not do that. It sets out large-scale reform, intended to change the system quickly and permanently.

I have proposed a total overhaul of YOI education, premised on taking one of the most incredible public policy successes of the past twenty years – the improvement of England's education system – and ensuring that the knowledge, expertise, and dedication of the professionals that sit in that system are now turned to the education of the boys in our YOIs.

It can be done. I was a school head, a so-called 'turnaround' head. I, and many other school and trust leaders like me, were told that the schools we took on, and the pupils within them, were too difficult. That with 'kids like these', excellence couldn't be achieved.

Yet look at what happened. Look at the individual schools that were turned around, the trusts that transformed whole areas. Look bigger; consider how England now leads in international rankings on reading and writing.

I look at that transformation and I simply cannot accept for another moment that we cannot do better for children in prisons. Children are in custody because we have chosen to deny them their liberty. When children have committed crimes, done terrible things, that might well be the right thing to do, for themselves, their victims, and the wider community. But the removal of one right does not mean that we should remove others.

Yet the education these children receive too often narrows to the bare minimum, to whatever can be delivered around a fractured regime and reduced hours. As things stand, we take a cohort of children

who tend to have low levels of prior attainment, or long stretches out of school, we promise them less than half of the number of hours of education schools provide, and often deliver less than half of even that. With children in prisons regularly getting just an hour of education a day.

We fail to impart the powerful knowledge that has become commonplace in our schools. From the very fundamentals of literacy and numeracy to the wider powerful cultural and academic knowledge that children in prison need like every other child.

We fail to respond to what is often their clearest point of motivation – an education that provides a clear line of sight to a good job. What we offer is too small scale, poorly designed, or not accessible to too many boys.

And we are failing to develop these young men as people by not offering them the opportunities to better understand themselves or wider society.

The last of those failings is particularly stark. Britain's education law has long insisted that schooling is not only about what children can do, but about who they are becoming. This goes back to the Education Act 1944. Britain sat off a blasted continent in the rubble of a war just ended. From this point, we set out that the purpose of the state education system was to contribute to the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community. We have, in effect, a legal recognition that education has two jobs: to equip a child to act in the world, and to help that child make sense of their own life within it.

In the context of YOIs that means an education that gives children the knowledge they need to live in the world and the guidance they need to live with themselves.

My conclusion in this review is that education provided to children in YOIs could not be further from that idea. Instead, we have seen decades of deepening failure. We have a chance to change this. To take on a problem that others have viewed as intractable and make progress no one thought possible.

Over two decades ago, England looked at our education system and decided it was not good enough. Through a series of reforms, sustained across multiple governments, England’s schools improved hugely. Now is the chance for the state to once again transform a public service, to once again show how we as a nation can rise to a public policy challenge and succeed.

That is why I believe that the reforms here are, and must be, bold. I set out in these pages a vision for education in custody that is ambitious, rigorous, and humane. A system that delivers the best that has been thought and said, and that concerns itself not only with literacy, numeracy, and a route to work but with the cultivation of conscience, of discernment, and of the tools to imagine a life other than the one that led to the cell door.

We owe both victims and these children nothing less. In truth, we owe them both a great deal more.

Executive Summary

Background

The Children's Commissioner was commissioned to carry out this review by the Ministry of Justice to examine why education in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) is failing to meet the needs of children in custody and what reforms are needed to improve outcomes.

The importance of a high-quality education for a child in custody is hard to overstate. Detention of a child must always be a last resort, but when it happens it must be seen as a moment to turn around a child's life. Education is central to that – to provide children with a sense of purpose, an understanding of themselves, as well as the tangible knowledge and skills they will need when they are released from custody. The goal of custody must be to ensure that a child who has offended never does so again, for their own sake and for the sake of their victims and wider society.

And yet for far too many children in custody, it is failing to do so. The findings of this review are consistent with over ten years of inspections, reviews and independent studies, including HMIP and Ofsted's joint thematic inspection which found that there has been a decade of declining quality of education in YOIs.

Despite repeated attempts at reform, the quality of education in YOIs remains poor, with very few children achieving positive outcomes and children frequently receiving less than their already low legal entitlement of 15 hours of education per week. While the government's commitment in the Youth Justice White Paper to increase the time children spend out of their cells is welcome, increasing access to education alone will not improve outcomes unless that time is used effectively and is supported by a secure estate that is capable of delivering high-quality learning.

Education in YOIs is too often set up to fail. Children arrive in custody with significant educational disadvantages and have high levels of complex learning needs alongside histories of disengagement from education. They enter custodial environments that are often unstable, experience a curriculum that does not align with their needs or aspirations, and encounter fragmented systems across the YOI that disrupts both learning and progression. But even with that challenging context, the quality of the teaching they receive is simply not good enough.

Key findings

The review identified several key areas that are contributing to children's poor experience of education in custody.

Children arrive with significant additional needs

Children in custody are among the most educationally disadvantaged children in the country. Many have experienced prolonged absence from education, exclusion, unmet social and learning needs, poor mental health, and significant disruption to their learning before entering custody.

The Commissioner's 2025 report on *The Educational Journeys of Children in Secure Settings* found that children in custody are among the most educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable children in England:

- More than three quarters (77%) were **persistently or severely absent** from school in the year before custody, over half (54%) had been out of education for at least an academic year prior to entering a secure setting, and around a quarter had experienced permanent exclusion.

  Children in secure settings were five times more likely than their peers to have an **Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)** and 1.5 times more likely to receive SEN Support.

The Children's Commissioner's office was provided with the most recent Education Needs Assessments of children in youth custody which further highlighted the **complexity of need among children in YOIs**. In particular, their high levels of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), autism, ADHD and speech and language needs.

The wider operation of YOIs undermines education

The operation of the youth secure estate is inseparable from the delivery of education.

- High levels of **violence, separation arrangements, extensive use of 'keep-aparts', limited time out of cells and difficulties moving children** around large sites all reduce access to education and disrupt learning. Children frequently miss lessons or experience delays for reasons unrelated to education itself.

- **YOIs do not have a shared purpose or set of values** across education, residential and operational functions. This means values across the estate can be misaligned, causing tension between staff and confusion for children, making it more difficult to establish a positive learning culture. Crucially, **children do not experience a coherent behaviour management approach** across all areas.

- The **physical environment** can also undermine learning. Classrooms and educational spaces often reflect the custodial nature of the estate rather than environments that are designed to support children's engagement and development. There is often insufficient space to deliver more targeted interventions.

The quality of teaching isn't meeting the needs of children in custody

The quality of teaching a child receives is one of the strongest determinants of educational progress and attainment. This is especially important for children in custody, who are often entering with significant educational disadvantage. However, there are multiple factors that impact on the effectiveness of teachers in YOIs.

- The current providers of education in YOIs are not required to be registered as schools, colleges or alternative provision

- **The inappropriate and unplanned curriculum** in YOIs mean that teachers are often managing children working at very different levels within the same class, with a range of special educational needs and an array of behavioural issues.

- Education staff reported that they are offered **lower salaries, less favourable pensions and fewer holiday entitlements** than their counterparts in mainstream education, making recruitment and retention difficult. This can result in some teachers entering the role with **limited prior teaching experience**, working towards qualifications while in post.

The contractual arrangements for delivering education often work against high-quality provision

The commissioning and governance of education in YOIs is complicated and unnecessarily complex. Responsibility for education is divided between the Youth Custody Service (YCS), contracted education providers, and the YOI education leaders, creating fragmented accountability and making it difficult to establish clear ownership of educational outcomes.

- The current contract model is largely developed from **adult prison commissioning arrangements**, and does not reflect the realities of educating children in custody
- A critical measure of teaching quality is whether children make good progress. Yet there is currently no robust, externally validated measure of progress in place
- Previous research by the Children's Commissioner has shown only **20% of children who had sat an English GCSE passed, compared to 71% of their peers in schools**; and similarly, 20% who sat a mathematics GCSE passed, substantially behind the 72% of pupils in schools who passed.
- There is limited opportunity for **collaboration and learning** across the whole estate
- **Children are offered a curriculum that doesn't meet their needs**
- Many children value **vocational education** and find these courses the most engaging. However, there is a lack of capacity to offer vocational courses to all children. When they are provided, the reasons for the choices of vocational courses on offer and the way children are assigned to them can be unclear.
- Achieving **Level 2 qualifications** in English and Maths remains critical for future educational and employment opportunities, yet many children aren't supported to achieve them.
- There are not sufficiently clear requirements for the curriculum to promote the **personal development** of pupils, requirements which are set in the statutory guidance on the National Curriculum.

- Children's **sentence length plays a significant role** in what courses and qualifications they can pursue. The current model often struggles to meet the needs of both children on remand or serving short sentences and those spending longer periods in custody.

Important information about children isn't being shared

A key barrier to meeting children's educational needs in custody is the poor sharing of information about a child's educational history, including their SEND and support needs.

- **Information sharing between other settings and YOIs is often inconsistent**, meaning that assessments, support plans and knowledge about a child's learning needs are not transferred effectively when children move into or between YOIs.

- Responsibility for SEND support can be unclear, with **children in YOIs often unable to access SEND resources** and specialist provision available to children in the community.

Recommendations

The need for urgent improvement in the provision of education in YOIs is clear. This report therefore sets out both a longer-term goal for the fundamental transformation of the youth custodial estate, as well as a series of changes that can and should be implemented urgently, largely without the need for legislative change or significant investment in new infrastructure.

Long-term goal: End the use of YOIs

YOIs are increasingly ill-suited to the needs of the small but highly complex population they now hold. Despite a reduction in the number of children in custody, persistent concerns around safety and violence, weak relationships with staff and poor educational outcomes continue to harm children and undermine efforts to prevent reoffending.

The government intends to publish its Youth Custody Transformation Plan later this year to address these longstanding concerns about the youth secure estate.[2] While this report focuses on improving education in YOIs, its recommendations directly support the objectives of the Transformation Plan and provide a practical route to achieving them. By creating a more child-centred learning environment,

improving safety, and increasing access to meaningful education and purposeful activity, the recommendations will help ensure that children spend more time out of their cells and actively engaged in their development. This is not only beneficial for children but it's essential to delivering broader system reform. High-quality education can provide children with a sense of purpose, strengthen their understanding of themselves and their future aspirations, and equip them with the knowledge, qualifications and skills needed to successfully reintegrate into their communities on release. In doing so, improving education in YOIs has the potential to contribute directly to the Transformation Plan's aims of improving outcomes for children in custody, supporting effective resettlement, and reducing reoffending.

The Youth Custody Transformation Plan will also set out the government's ambition to transform the youth custody estate into a network of smaller therapeutic settings over the next ten years. While welcome, given the scale and urgency of the challenges facing YOIs, the Ministry of Justice must bring this timeline forward. The changes recommended in this report demonstrate that many of the foundations of a therapeutic model, including safer environments, stronger relationships, greater access to education, and a more tailored approach to meeting children's needs, can begin to be implemented now.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) should therefore set out how, within the next three years, a model of therapeutic care for children in need of secure care will be rolled out across the youth custody estate. This must be based on a model of smaller settings that are closer to where children live and should include a plan to phase out all YOIs and Secure Training Centres (STCs). A comprehensive, long-term strategy for its development should include step down services for when children are ready to move on from secure provision, into gradually more open settings. These should be organised regionally to enable children to be as close to home as possible

Recommendations for the wider youth secure estate

Poor educational outcomes in youth custody are not the result of a single operational failure, but of systemic weaknesses across the secure estate. A lack of clarity about the purpose of custody, inconsistent approaches to behaviour management, policies designed primarily for adult prisons, the separation of children and limited time out of cell, and weak integration between education, custody and pastoral support all undermine children's ability to engage in learning and make progress. Improving

educational outcomes will require a more child-centred approach to custody, with education embedded within the wider goals of personal development and preparation for life beyond custody. These recommendations apply across all YOIs in England and Wales, while those recommendations about the contracts held by the YCS apply only to the publicly run prisons in England

- **Recommendation:** The MoJ must establish an agreed purpose of children's custody, which should include promoting the personal development of children in order to prevent them reoffending, and enabling them to fully participate in society.

- **Recommendation:** All settings should have a consistent set of behaviour policies, making clear that they should act as one institution working towards the same outcomes, and joint training on the implementation of those policies and best practice in behaviour management. The behaviour policies currently in place are not always consistent in YOIs – and it is unclear how good or bad behaviour in one domain affects children's rewards or punishments in another.

- **Recommendation:** Too many failings within youth custody stem from the fact it is children's provision within an adult service. It is essential that the YCS introduce separate policies on education, safeguarding, time out of cell, safety and risk for the youth estate which cannot simply be copied from the adult estate, and which should acknowledge that the welfare of children must be their primary consideration.

- **Recommendation:** The MoJ and YCS should introduce greater scrutiny of the use of keep-apart arrangements. All decisions to separate children from their peers should follow a formal process involving both education and YCS operational staff, which considers the educational consequences for children. If staff wish to put in place a non-association which would affect their ability to participate in a chosen educational pathway, this recommendation must be approved by the Governor. The Governor should also have to sign off a child's withdrawal from education.

- **Recommendation:** Every child should have a designated youth justice worker, building on the aims of the Custody Support Plan, who should be included in any decisions about educational options, and be invited to regular 'parents' evening' check-ins with education.

- **Recommendation:** All YOIs should also provide for in-person parents' evenings, with children's family members or primary carers.

Recommendations for improving the quality of education

The most important factor in the quality of education a child receives is the quality of their teacher. Currently education in YOIs is delivered by contracted providers who are not specialists in educating children. It hasn't drawn on the huge recent improvements in the quality of teaching and education in England, and crucially it isn't structured for the needs of children in YOIs. Given the focus of these recommendations, they are applicable only to YOIs in England.

New providers

- **Recommendation**: The three current contracts in the English YOIs should be terminated at the next break clause to allow an improvement intervention. This should be done to enable a time-limited, direct intervention in the secure estate as a response to long term failings and the ongoing decline in educational standards. The Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education and the newly appointed National Advisor on Education in YOIs should work together to identify and bring forward outstanding education providers to deliver education in YOIs.
- **Recommendation**: Three new funding arrangements should be drawn up that require that those delivering education should be:
    - A registered education provider with a proven track record of excellent education provision, particularly for students displaying challenging behaviour or who have been excluded from other settings;
    - Part of a network of schools with an outstanding track record which will provide continuous professional development, curriculum, and pedagogical support for the YOI provider;
    - Evidence of how they would deliver core literacy requirements for this cohort, particularly phonics for secondary school aged children;
    - Be able to deliver an outstanding vocational education curriculum – either directly or in partnership;

- Able to demonstrate a model for the personal development element of the curriculum tailored for this unique cohort; and
- Have either the internal capacity, or a partnership with another provider, to deliver tutoring.

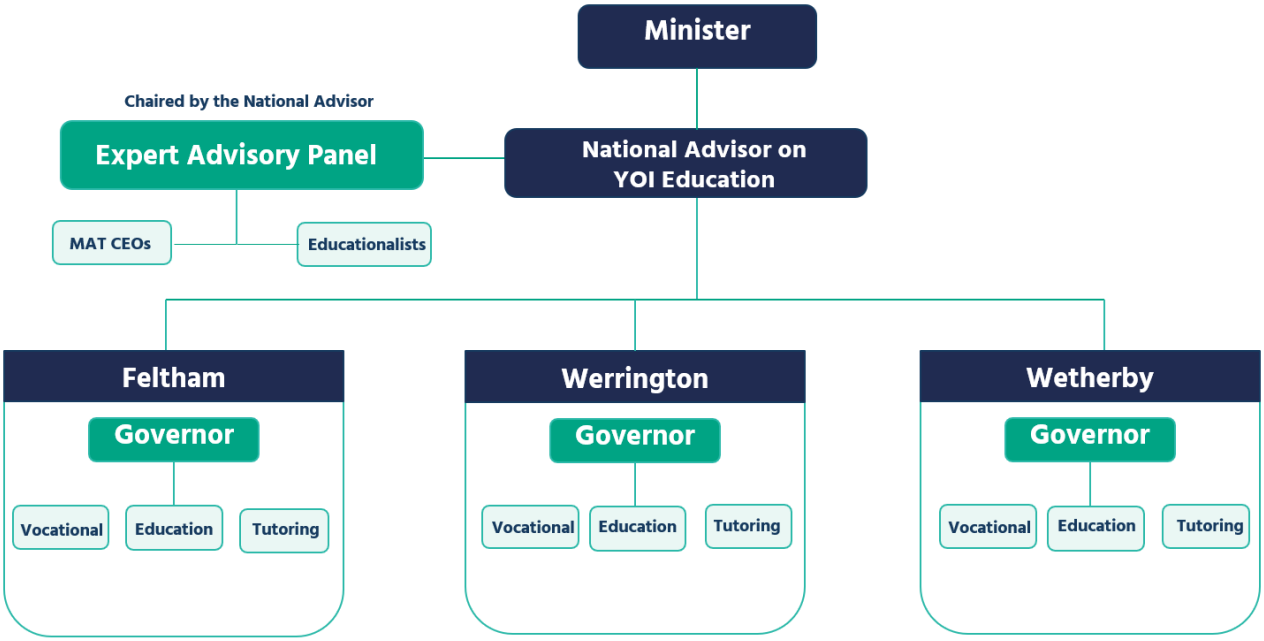
- **Recommendation:** The revised funding arrangements must clearly set out how providers will meet children's entitlements to support for special educational needs within the custodial estate, for children with EHCPs as well as those who do not meet the threshold for a plan. The costs of that provision should be included in funding arrangements.
- **Recommendation:** Given the complexity in managing children with very different levels and sentence duration, and the number of 'keep-aparts' which govern children's subject choices, there should be an increase in one-to-one tutoring. The next provider must be required to provide tutoring in their education delivery.

Accountability

- **Recommendation**: The headteachers of these three new providers would be directly accountable to the Governors within the YOI, and a newly appointed National Advisor on Education in YOIs, at the most senior level. This role should report directly into the Minister with responsibility for Youth Justice. In addition, they should report against progress children are making to an Expert Advisory Panel made up of leading CEOs and educationalists who will be supporting the development and delivery of education in YOIs. The panel members should work together to develop shared materials, approaches and training across all YOIs including on:
  - The most effective training on behaviour management, with a rigorous underpinning that challenges broad-brush terminology like 'trauma-informed';
  - Effective pedagogy, based on methods proven to be effective with similar cohorts;
  - A world class curriculum that is focused on character development;
  - Highly effective vocational education provision tailored to this cohort; and

- The use and provision of targeted 1 to 1 tuition, particularly focussed on literacy and numeracy.

- **Recommendation:** The new funding arrangements should set out clear accountability and escalation processes, ensuring that concerns can be raised through both the National Adviser on YOI Education and the individual education provider CEOs where necessary.



Funding

- **Recommendation:** The MoJ should deliver additional funding to support the model made up of:

  - An Innovation Fund for charities or education providers to bid for developing any elements of the curriculum which are required, such as age-appropriate phonics, extracurricular activities, and flexible stretch work for children with particular interests and abilities; and

  - A sufficiently resourced Capital Fund for delivering additional space for vocational courses and one to one tutoring.

In the long run, high-quality education could be delivered under a number of structures. The key focus for the next three years should be getting the best educators and teachers in the country and in front of children in YOIs.

Pay, condition and hours

- **Recommendation:** Teachers in YOIs should have consistent or directly comparable pay and the same conditions as teachers in other school settings. However, given the nature of the secure estate, YOIs should continue to teach year round, without set holiday periods. While holiday periods should not mirror mainstream schools, children should have regular short breaks from formal learning, with enrichment activities available during these periods.

- **Recommendation:** All YOIs should be required to deliver at least 30 hours of education, including timetabled education and 1:1 tutoring, across a timetable that resembles a mainstream school in terms of time spent in education. The Ministry of Justice should publish monthly data on how much education is delivered.

Recommendations for designing the curriculum

The education offer in YOIs is not sufficiently designed around the needs, development and future aspirations of the children it serves. Too many children enter custody with low literacy, while access to meaningful vocational opportunities, structured character development and clear progression pathways remains inconsistent. It must be designed to reduce reoffending, for the sake of children in custody and their victims.

In particular, the current approach does not adequately reflect the different circumstances of children on remand, serving short sentences or moving into adulthood. A more personalised model is needed, with literacy at its core, guaranteed access to vocational learning, and pathways that support successful progression into education, training and employment.

- **Recommendation:** The curriculum for a YOI should retain the current elements of English, Maths, ESOL and PSHE, but should add a requirement for personal development education which should be developed into an explicitly taught and timetabled model of personal development.

- **Recommendation:** A central goal of all education in YOIs must be improving literacy – to deliver the English requirement of the core curriculum, an age-appropriate phonics curriculum must be in place for those who need it, and providers will be required to demonstrate proven models of delivery.

- **Recommendation:** Age-appropriate, evidence based baseline testing should be a key part of every child's induction into the secure estate where information about a child's level of learning cannot be provided by their pre-custody school or educational institution. That information should be used to determine what a child should learn and the level of progress they should make, including towards qualifications, with robust measures on what counts as good progress.

- **Recommendation:** Education providers should develop a curriculum that provides explicit teaching for personal development. That could be done in a number of ways including through a literacy programme, wider enrichment, or work-related learning. That should include support for every child from their designated youth justice worker who should receive training and instruction in how to support a child's personal development.

- **Recommendation**: Every child should have a guaranteed place on a vocational course. The government's response to the Milburn review should establish the most appropriate vocational courses to prevent children in YOIs from becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), which should be delivered across all settings. No vocational courses should be offered to children which, for safety or sentencing reasons, they cannot complete. The Ministry of Justice should provide additional capital expenditure for any new learning spaces required to deliver these courses.

- **Recommendation**: Education providers should develop modular courses to enable students to work towards Level 3 qualifications, to bridge the current gap for students who have completed Level 2 qualifications.

- **Recommendation:** Three separate pathways should be developed for children on remand and short sentences, those who will be released as children, and those going into the adult estate.

    - There should be short, modular courses developed for children on remand or short sentences – including 'stepping stone' qualifications for those working towards Level 2.

- Children who will be released as children must have education places secured on release and be able to do distance learning or pre-engagement with that provider.
- Children going into the adult estate must be able to complete qualifications that they will be able to build on in the adult estate, or which jobs in the adult estate require.

Recommendations for information sharing and improving connections

The current system places the burden of navigating fragmented services on some of the most vulnerable children in custody. Weak information sharing, inconsistent transfer of health and education records, and a lack of clear responsibility for children with SEND mean that support is too often disrupted at precisely the point when children are most vulnerable, highlighting the need for a more integrated and accountable model of oversight and care

- **Recommendation:** There should be one consistent data sharing platform across all YOIs, where information from services both prior to children entering custody and in custody should be recorded. Each child should have one consistent custody plan on the platform.
- **Recommendation:** The Department for Education should implement the single unique identifier, as provided for in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, to allow for more effective data matching and sharing for all children in England, including all children in custody.
- **Recommendation:** All children in YOIs should have looked after child status, and the Virtual School Head of their home local authority should be responsible for working with the education provider in the YOI to plan their transition back into education in the community, or liaising with the education provider in the adult estate they will be moving to.
- **Recommendation**: Any child with an EHCP when they enter a setting must have it reviewed jointly by their home local authority and the YOI upon entry; no child should have an EHCP paused or ended on entry to a YOI and the revised EHCP should be incorporated into their single learning plan setting out how their needs will be met in custody.
- **Recommendation:** All YOIs should have Release on Temporary License (ROTL) schemes to allow children, wherever possible, to participate in education in the setting in which they will be

enrolled upon release, or to complete elements of vocational qualifications. YOIs should strengthen relationships with education providers, training organisations and employers to provide equivalent engagement for children who are not eligible for ROTL.

- **Recommendation:** The MoJ should ensure that any information management system it uses is shared across the youth estate, and can include relevant information from education, health and youth justice services which follows children seamlessly into and between custodial settings. To enable this each YOI should ensure that it has robust data sharing agreements. The agreements should be made with all of the services which children come into contact with within the YOI and align with the principles set out in the government's recently consulted upon Information Sharing Guidance,[3] and align with the Information Sharing Duty as set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act.[4]

1. Background and methodology

"If we can't be ambitious about the most vulnerable children in our society, then what does that say about us? If we can't aim higher for the education of 400 children in the secure estate, then what are we doing?"

– Education professional

Following over a decade of decline in the quality of education in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), the Ministry of Justice formally commissioned the Children's Commissioner in May 2026 to carry out an independent review of education in YOIs.

To inform this review, the Children's Commissioner's office gathered evidence from experts across the youth justice and education sectors. This included four formal roundtables with stakeholders and further engagement with expert education and training providers, YOI governors and senior leaders, and staff working in YOIs, including youth custody officers and teachers. Their comments are quoted throughout this report. Alongside this primary evidence, the office reviewed recent Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prison (HMIP) inspection reports, thematic reviews and HMIP's survey analysis of YOIs to identify common challenges in education across the youth secure estate.

In summer 2026 the Children's Commissioner's office visited every YOI – Feltham, Werrington, Wetherby and Parc – to speak informally with children and professionals about experiences of education and what needed to be improved. The office also visited the Secure School, Oasis Restore in Kent. Notes from these meetings and visits are quoted throughout this report, which also draws on published literature and unpublished documents shared with the Children's Commissioner by YOIs. This includes written quotes from children in YOIs in response to the Children's Commissioner's survey of children in England, The Big Future. Ahead of publication, a draft of this report was shared for feedback with the YCS, and edits have been made as a result.

This review recognises the considerable challenges facing the youth custody estate and the barriers these create in delivering high-quality education. However, it also highlights a significant opportunity. The number of children in custody is now at a historic low, the youth estate is comparatively well

resourced, and there are committed staff across the system who recognise the need for change. Unlike most education systems, youth custody has a high degree of control over the environment in which children learn and develop. Children in YOIs are among the most vulnerable in society, and deserve the same ambition, opportunity and support as any other child. This report sets out a practical blueprint for reform, showing how education can be placed at the heart of a safer, more stable and more child-centred secure estate.

The Children's Commissioner's Office would like to extend its sincere thanks to the children and staff in YOIs who participated in this project. The experiences and insights they shared have been invaluable in helping to better understand life in a YOI and the challenges of delivering education in secure settings. The office is also very grateful to the many youth justice and education professionals who shared their time and expertise, and those who joined members of the office on visits to YOIs.

1.1. The importance of education

Education is one of the most powerful things that a society can offer its citizens. In England, education has been a public service, with free primary education long established and the 1944 Education Act extending free secondary education to all children, no matter who they are or where they might live. For nearly a century, since the Children Act 1933, the law has set out that children in custody have a right to receive an education. Education serves several critical purposes in society, each of which is even more important for children in custody.

Higher levels of education are associated with better earnings.[5] Even within the context of school-age qualifications, this relationship holds. Achieving five or more good GCSEs (including English and maths) delivers lifetime productivity gains worth around £100,000 on average, compared to those with below Level 2 or no qualifications.[6] Achieving more GCSEs is, again, linked to better lifetime earnings; men holding 5-7 good GCSEs (including English and maths) as their highest qualification have lifetime productivity gains worth around £73,000 compared to those with only 3-4 good GCSEs; for women, the figure is £55,000.[7] So too is it the case at level 3: men with 2 or more A levels as their highest qualification have lifetime productivity returns of around £90,000 compared to those with 5-7 good GCSEs; for women the figure is around £76,000.[8]

There are also a host of additional non-pecuniary benefits to education – for instance, it leads to additional years of life[9] and possibly to greater satisfaction with life.[10] More than this, it adds other, less tangible, benefits. It allows access to the greatest works of science, literature, and philosophy, and opens doors to greater appreciation of music, art, and poetry.

At a fundamental level, education must happen simply because it is the right of every child under Section 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.[11]

Britain's education law has long insisted that schooling is not only about what children can do, but about who they are becoming, with clear prescriptions for social and moral education included in the 1944 Education Act.

That principle was carried forward and sharpened into a duty on individual schools by the Education Reform Act 1988, which required the curriculum to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development – adding 'cultural' - and to prepare them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life. The Education Act 2002 and the Ofsted frameworks that followed gave this its familiar modern name that educators across the country will recognise: spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC), now a criterion every school in England is judged against, and creating a clear recognition that education has two jobs; to equip a child to act in the world, and to help that child make sense of their own life within it.

1.2. The importance of education in secure settings

Research shows education and skills interventions act as protective factors for people in custody, including reducing the longer-term risks of reoffending and improving employment outcomes.[12]

Access to education is a fundamental right for all children, and children in secure settings retain this right as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, beyond this right to access, for children in secure settings, education is a vital element of how we provide children with a chance to re-engage and shape their futures in a positive way. Ofsted and HMIP recognise that education provides children with the tools they need to reintegrate successfully into society, and to develop meaningful work and study goals.[13]

This is particularly important as research shows children in secure settings are among some of the most vulnerable children in society with many bringing experiences of missing education, school exclusion, being in care and SEND. Previous research by the Children's Commissioner on the educational journeys of children in the secure estate revealed that only 20% of children who had sat an English GCSE passed, compared to 71% of their peers in schools; and similarly, 20% who sat a mathematics GCSE passed, substantially behind the 72% of pupils in schools who passed.[14]

Given the characteristics of children in the secure estate and the benefits for those in custody after release, both the amount and quality of education they receive in secure settings are crucial.

Education in custody serves a vital purpose not only for those children who receive it, but also for the victims of offending – by helping ensure children in custody do not go on to cause further harm. Participating in education while in custody has been consistently linked to lower rates of re-offending.[15]

1.3. The importance of good teaching

Over recent decades, there has been an increased understanding of how children learn and how to improve children's outcomes. Their application can be seen clearly in the generally improved PISA results for children in England in reading, maths, and science relative to other countries.[16]

While there is no 'silver bullet' for educational attainment, among the many factors that shape a child's educational journey, from family background to school funding, one stands out consistently in the research: the quality of teaching a pupil receives. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is clear: great teaching is the most important lever schools have to improve outcomes for their pupils.[17]

The EEF itself is also a good example of how teaching in England has changed. Over the last 20 years, evidence on teaching has developed substantially. There has been improved understanding of the cognitive science of learning, and this is more commonly applied. Teachers are more likely to be considering the cognitive and metacognitive elements of learning when considering their teaching. The EEF defines these as follows:

- **Cognitive strategies** include subject-specific strategies or memorisation techniques such as methods to solve problems in maths.

- **Metacognitive strategies** are what we use to monitor or control our cognition, for example checking whether our approach to solving a mathematics problem worked or considering which cognitive strategy is the best fit for a task.[18]

Additionally, reviews show that evidence-based techniques work for *all* pupils – for instance, the EEF review into teaching children with SEN in mainstream schools finds many of the techniques encouraged as part of high-quality teaching are also effective for pupils with SEN. This includes providing, positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behaviour, the teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence, and the use of explicit instruction (or similar structured, systematic teaching).[19]

In practical terms, the importance of teaching makes it reasonable to assume that two pupils with similar starting points can end up with very different academic trajectories depending largely on the effectiveness of the teachers in front of them. Other studies estimate that having a one-standard deviation better than average teacher raises the GCSE test score by 25% of a standard deviation.[20]

The Sutton Trust found that 'the difference between a very effective teacher and a poorly performing teacher is large.' For example, 'during one year with a very effective maths teacher, pupils gain 40% more in their learning than they would with a poorly performing maths teacher', and that the effect of having a very effective teacher as opposed to an average teacher is the same as the effect of reducing class size by ten students in Year 5 (ages 9-10) and thirteen or more students in Year 6 (ages 10-11),[21]

This matters most when the children in question are starting from a point of disadvantage. Over a school year, these pupils gain 1.5 years' worth of learning with very effective teachers, compared with 0.5 years with poorly performing teachers. In other words, for poor pupils the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning.[22] [23]

2. Young Offender Institutions (YOIs)

In England, children under the age of 18 who are remanded or sentenced to custody can be held in four types of secure settings: Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), Secure Children's Homes (SCHs), a Secure Training Centre (STC) or a Secure School. There is currently only one Secure School in England which as of the Children's Commissioner's team's visit in September 2026 accommodated seven children. In 2025–

26, the number of children held in STCs and YOIs decreased, continuing a long-running trend. The average population of children held in these establishments was 371 in 2025–26, compared with 939 in 2015–16. [24]

This report focuses on YOIs, which make up the largest part of the youth custodial estate, accommodating around three-quarters of all children in custody.[25]

There are three YOIs in England – Feltham in London, Wetherby near Leeds, and Werrington in Staffordshire – which are all run by HM Prison and Probation Service, overseen by the Youth Custody Service within HMPPS. In addition, there is Parc YOI in Wales, which is part of the privately run HMP Parc, for which G4S currently holds the contract.

2.1. The children in YOIs

YOIs can only accommodate children aged 15 and over. Many of these children have experienced poverty, family instability, trauma, exclusion from education, poor mental health, and involvement with children's social care.

While the overall number of children in custody has fallen substantially, those who receive custodial sentences are increasingly likely to have committed serious offences, resulting in a youth custody population that is smaller but significantly more complex in terms of needs, risks and vulnerabilities. In 2025-26, violent offences were the most common offence group among children in custody, while sexual offences were the second most common.[26] As a result, YOIs hold a population of children who often present with complex needs while simultaneously coming to terms with the consequences of serious offending behaviour.

There are also a number of young people aged 18 and over in YOIs, who are held beyond their 18th birthday either because of capacity issues in the adult estate or because they are being released to the community and an additional transfer to the adult estate is not seen as in their best interest.

Persistent issues in YOIs

Despite the smaller population, significant concerns remain about children's experiences within YOIs.

Continuous inspections find that **safety and violence are a major issue.** Recent survey data from HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) found that 39% of children reported feeling unsafe at some point during their time in custody. This is reflected in the latest safety data for the youth secure estate, which show that there were 1,816 assault incidents between in the year ending June 2026, of which 103 were serious.[27]

"YOIs are violent places, I don't even feel safe during lessons ...there were eight incidents yesterday."– Child

High levels of violence contribute to the **frequent use of restrictive practices**. More than two-thirds of children reported having been physically restrained by staff, while over half said they had been separated from their peers as a punishment.[28] This is supported by recent findings from the Independent Restraint Review Panel, who are responsible for reviewing incidents of restraint and hold HMPPS to account for the use of Pain Inducing Techniques (PIT) within the youth secure estate. In 2025, there were a total of 111 incidents where Minimising Physical Restraint (MMPR) techniques were used, including 11 incidents where PIT was recorded.[29] Six of these incidents involved the use of Pava, an incapacitant spray which causes severe eye pain and temporary blindness.

There are a high number of children on **short-term remand** who spend only a brief period of time in custody before being released. Between August 2024 and July 2025, 190 children were remanded to custody before subsequently being bailed, with almost half spending two weeks or less in custody.[30] Many of these children were entering custody for the first time, were highly vulnerable, and reported feeling confused and frightened about their detention. In response to the rising number of children on short-term remand, the Youth Justice White Paper set out its ambition to reduce the number of remanded children in custody by 25% by the end of this Parliament.[31]

The **relationship between staff and children remain weak** in many YOIs. HMIP found that only 51% of children in YOIs reported feeling cared for by staff, while one in three said they did not have a member of staff that they could turn to for help. Weak relationships can undermine children's trust in the institution, reduce engagement with education and support services, and make it more difficult to manage behaviour.[32]

While YOIs now hold a much smaller population, they remain complex and challenging environments, which creates significant barriers to delivering consistent, high-quality education.

2.2. The poor quality of education in YOIs

Over the last decade, there have been several reports and studies which have highlighted both the value and challenges of delivering high-quality education in Young Offender Institutions (YOIs).

Previous reviews

In 2016, Charlie Taylor published his review of the youth justice system which revealed the educational challenges children experience prior to entering YOIs and recognised that youth custody was an opportunity to re-engage these children and break the cycle of educational disadvantage.[33] He proposed transforming youth custody into a network of Secure Schools; smaller custodial establishments which would provide enhanced education within a therapeutic environment. England's first Secure School, Oasis Restore, opened in 2024 after lengthy legal challenges to its underpinning legislation as well as significant building delays, and following a temporary closure, reopened in summer 2026. In July 2026, it was accommodating six children. A recent Ofsted monitoring visit to Oasis Restore noted that while children were engaged with education and enriching activities, there were serious concerns about the use of physical restraint.[34] More recent reports suggest this is being addressed.[35]

In 2024, nearly a decade on from Taylor's review, a joint review by Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) found that many of the same challenges remained, with some having worsened.[36] This included deteriorating teaching quality, weak approaches to behaviour management and minimal support for children with SEND. Their report identified significant weaknesses in education delivery across YOIs, including limited access to education, reduced time out of cell and operational pressures that undermined children's ability to participate consistently. These challenges were exacerbated by staffing shortages, the complexities of operating within a secure environment, and strained relationships between YOI and education staff.

HMIP's latest survey of children in custody further highlights that poor educational outcomes in YOIs are symptomatic of wider systemic problems.[37] While education provision continues to fall short, it sits within institutions that continue to struggle with violence and instability. The findings underline the urgent need for reform and strengthen the case for a clear strategy to phase out and ultimately close YOIs in favour of smaller, child-centred settings.

Ofsted inspections

YOIs are jointly inspected by HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Ofsted, with the former focusing on the overall functioning of the YOI and the latter specifically on the education provision. In Wales the education provision is inspected by the Welsh inspectorate, Estyn. The table below sets out the latest education inspection findings for each YOI, as well as the number of hours of education children are receiving out of the 15 required.

Table 1: Comparisons of most recent HMIP Inspection findings for education provision and the average hours of education provided for each YOI.

YOI	Education Inspection findings	Average education per week September 2025 to August 2026
Feltham	Ofsted assessment of education skills and work provision [38] **Overall effectiveness:** Inadequate **Quality of education:** Requires improvement **Behaviour and attitudes:** Inadequate **Personal development:** Requires improvement **Leadership and management:** Inadequate - August 2025 *"Children did not receive sufficient education to meet either their entitlement or need. Leaders and managers planned carefully so that each child who was able to work with others should receive a minimum of 18 hours of teaching and learning. However, for reasons outside of the control of the children, attendance at lessons was very low and punctuality was poor. As a result, most children received only half of the allotted time in lessons, and some even less."*	5.9 hours

Werrington	Ofsted assessment of education skills and work provision [39] **Overall effectiveness:** Inadequate **Quality of education**: Inadequate **Behaviour and attitudes:** Inadequate **Personal development:** Inadequate **Leadership and management:** Inadequate. - July 2025 *"Children had poor access to, and experience of, learning. Very few children were receiving their statutory minimum entitlement to 15 hours of education a week. Although there were sufficient activity spaces for the number of children, most of these spaces were only partly used"*	12.8 hours
Wetherby	Ofsted assessment of education skills and work provision [40] **Overall effectiveness:** Inadequate **Quality of education**: Inadequate **Behaviour and attitudes:** Inadequate **Personal development:** Requires improvement **Leadership and management:** Inadequate - February 2026 *"Attendance was too low. Just over half the children attended their lessons in education. This was due to children attending interventions or appointments. Teachers did not have high enough expectations of children in education and vocational training."*	9.4 hours
Parc	**Estyn overall judgement is that outcomes for prisoners are good.** [41] - June 2026	18.1 hours

	"The timetable offered learners 25 hours of planned education time per week. The timetable was well structured and allowed for short breaks between sessions, where learners could socialise or relax, and this contributed to learners' generally good levels of concentration in class. Learners who were segregated received a reduced timetable but still had valuable daily contact with teachers and access to in-cell learning materials."	

Note: Hours of education per week in 2025 is an average of monthly internal management data supplied by the Youth Custody Service for Feltham, Werrington and Wetherby, and FOI monthly data published by Howard League for Parc [42]

Children's Commissioner's research and monitoring

The Children's Commissioner's 2025 report on the educational journeys of children in secure settings described children's educational disadvantage prior to entering custody, including high levels of school absence, exclusion, child poverty and special educational needs.[43] Children told us that their time in the secure estate often exacerbated these disadvantages, rather than addressing them or providing a meaningful opportunity for positive change.

This was supported by data gathered by the Commissioner on the educational outcomes of children in YOIs, which found that only 20% of children who sat English or maths GCSEs passed. More than one in five (21%) of children have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), 77% had been persistently or severely absent from school, 54% had been out of education for at least a year before custody, and around a quarter had been permanently excluded.[44]

The report strengthened the case for youth custody to be seen as a critical intervention point to break this cycle of educational disengagement, exclusion and low aspirations for the children who need it most.

The visits undertaken to YOIs for this review were not formal inspections of the quality of education. However, in line with the findings of previous inspection reports, education was often chaotic, with children taking 45 minutes to move from the wing to classrooms, unsure of what lesson they would be

attending, or with lessons cancelled at the last minute. Even where children did make it to lessons, and behavioural issues were well-managed in the classroom, it was difficult to identify clear learning objectives or assess what knowledge or skills children were expected to gain.

"It was not clear that anything of any educational value was happening in that room. They were all – the teacher included – just getting by." – Education professional

In response to these longstanding concerns, the Youth Custody Service implemented a three-year improvement programme through its YOI roadmap to effective practice[45] and has worked with specialist education providers to identify and embed more effective approaches to education delivery.

The publication of the Youth Justice White Paper in May 2026 marked a renewed commitment to improve education in youth custody.[46] The Government committed to increase the time children in YOIs spend out of their cells engaged in education, purposeful activity and rehabilitation, by at least 50% by the end of this Parliament. While welcome, this will not necessarily result in increased educational engagement and attainment – instead the system must be ambitious about how the time out of cell is being meaningfully used to help children develop skills, gain qualifications and grow into a person who can make sense of their own experiences and positively contribute to society.

2.3. Education delivery in YOIs

Education delivery in YOIs has been a predominantly outsourced model for at least 25 years. The key goal of outsourcing education provision in YOIs has been to draw in expertise from the wider education system, improve the consistency of education, and to put education at the heart of the youth custody model. The current model is the product of an evolution of that approach and includes three key elements.

Commissioning

Education contracts are commissioned nationally by the Youth Custody Service (YCS) for the three publicly run YOIs, rather than by the individual YOI. This means that accountability for education commissioning sits largely outside the direct control of YOI governors and senior education leaders. This creates a particularly complicated delivery and accountability framework, with responsibility for education split between the YCS, who hold and manage the contract, education providers, who are

accountable for delivering the contract, and YOI Heads of Education, who oversee education within the estate.

The current contracts across all three YOIs were awarded in 2022 and run until 31 August 2029. YOI governors and heads of education do not hold these contracts. Unlike leaders in mainstream schools, these individuals have limited influence over their design, performance measures or funding arrangements. The contractual relationship sits primarily between YCS and the education provider.

In Wales, where the YOI is run by G4S, the education is contracted to Novus Gower by HMPPS Wales so the YCS is not directly involved in the contract management.

Contract model

While the current contracts are tailored to delivering education for children, it is notable that all of the current providers are adult education or employment services rather than registered schools or colleges. The contracts themselves make no reference to the National Curriculum, or children's right to an education. Elements of the contract demonstrate that they are not sufficiently tailored to children, for example stating that the provider should work with learners to enable them to take on roles as teachers – which is clearly not appropriate for children.

The current contracts totalling £78.3 million are of the following values for the seven year period to 31 August 2029:

- **HM YOI Feltham**: Youth Custody Education Provision – £24,980,031, awarded to The Shaw Trust Limited.[47] This is for an operational capacity of 126 children (reported August 2026).[48]
- **HM YOI Werrington**: Youth Custody Education Provision – £20,399,292, awarded to PeoplePlus Group Limited.[49] This is for an operational capacity of 118 children (reported May 2025).[50]
- **HM YOI Wetherby:** Youth Custody Education Provision - £32,925,329, awarded to LTE Group (trading as NOVUS).[51] This is for an operational capacity of up to 288 children (reported February 2026).[52]

This amounts to a cost per year per child of £28,322 at Feltham, £24,696 at Werrington and £16,332 at Wetherby, for 15 hours of planned education. This compares to an average £7,800 per child per year in

secondary schools, who are required to provide 32.5 hours of education.[5354] When the actual hours of education delivered in YOIs are taken into account, the comparison becomes even more stark. At worst, the hourly cost per child for education at Feltham, given they only received 5.5 hours a week on average between September 2025 and August 2026 (or 309 hours in a 52 week year), would be £91.74; which would be akin to spending £116,286 for that child to receive 32.5 hours of education a week for a 39 week school year. It is worth noting that these calculations use operational capacity, while many YOIs have fewer children than this – for example at their last inspection Feltham had an operational capacity of 126, but only 94 children held[55]. This means these figures are likely to be underestimates of actual per-child costs.

The current contracts set out the 'Commissioned Volume Band' or number of learners the contract covers, which is the operational capacity for the prison; if the number is exceeded, the contract has mechanisms to adjust the volume band via reconciliation. In practice, the YOI population fluctuates and YOIs regularly operate below their design capacity, meaning they are often left with surplus resources to fund education provision.

Hours of education

Children aged 16 and under, and 17 year olds with special educational needs, in YOIs are legally entitled to at least 15 hours of education each week, and each YOI contract sets out that all learners should receive 15 hours of education. However, as detailed above, a series of inspections and reviews have found that YOIs have consistently failed to meet this minimum expectation.

Between September 2025 and August 2026, children received on average between 5.9 and 12.8 hours of education per week, substantially below their entitlement. At 5.9 hours per week, Feltham recorded the lowest average level of delivery.

Against this backdrop, any effort to improve educational outcomes in YOIs must consider not only the quality of teaching and curriculum, but also whether the current commissioning and accountability arrangements are enabling high-quality teaching.

3. What are the educational needs of children in YOIs?

Children's experience before entering custody

Although the number of children held in YOIs has fallen over time, their educational profiles have become increasingly complex. Across Wetherby, Werrington and Feltham YOIs, analysis of documents shared with the Children's Commissioner shows that children have high levels of SEND, disrupted educational histories, trauma, exclusion, and uncertainty about future pathways.

The Commissioner's 2025 report on *The Educational Journeys of Children in Secure Settings* found that:

- **21% of children in secure settings had an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP);** five times more than all pupils in other state-funded education settings. However, the true prevalence of any SEND within this cohort is estimated to be even higher as many will not have had enough contact with services prior to being in a YOI to have received a diagnosis and appropriate support planning.
- More than three quarters (77%) were **persistently or severely absent** from school in the year before custody, over half (54%) had been out of education for at least an academic year prior to entering a secure setting, and around a quarter had experienced permanent exclusion.
- Children in custody are disproportionately likely to have experienced **poverty, trauma and instability**, with almost nine in ten growing up in areas with above-average levels of child poverty.
- Many children have experienced **abuse, neglect, and difficult relationships** with professionals. These experiences can have a profound impact on attendance, behaviour, emotional regulation and readiness to learn.

As a result, education in custody is often about attempting to rebuild children's trust in education after years of absence, exclusion and negative experiences, while also responding to acute social, emotional and psychological needs.

Education Needs Assessments for children in YOIs

For this review, the Children's Commissioner's office was provided with the most recent Education Needs Assessments from each of the YOIs in England. These documents are written annually and identify the educational profile and needs of children in each setting for the purpose of reviewing and adjusting the curriculum with contracted providers.

These assessments echo the Commissioner's earlier findings, showing a very high prevalence of SEND across all three YOIs. One reports that 96% of their cohort have identified or suspected SEN but only a third have a formal EHCP. The most commonly identified SEND needs in this cohort are Autism, ADHD, Speech, Language and Communication Needs, and Social Emotional Mental Health Needs (SEMH). The reports also identify high levels of complexity, meaning that most children do not have a single diagnosis but present with multiple interacting needs.

Alongside their learning needs, children's existing education attainment levels are required to be assessed on intake. Reports show that the majority of children arrive in YOIs with English and Maths between Entry Level 3 and Level 1. One setting reported results from their reading screening: almost 50% of children were placed on their most intensive support plan meaning they are unable to decode well enough to allow comprehension and require highly adapted teaching, including "explicit literacy instruction, simplified language, and reduced reliance on written materials, alongside increased use of verbal, visual, and practical teaching approaches". While Ofsted have observed some YOIs making progress in using phonics, they also identified it as an area of weakness and recognised there was still more to do to fully embed phonics across the curriculum.[56]

Relatively low levels of academic attainment prior to entry to the secure estate can partly be explained by children's disrupted educational experiences throughout their childhood. The needs assessments show that many have a history of exclusion, managed moves, time spent in alternative provision or Pupil Referral Units or significant periods missing education.

Children continue to face significant disruptions to their education once in the secure estate. Most children in YOIs have short or unpredictable lengths of stay, with many on remand. This limits the feasibility of longer qualification pathways and significantly impacts motivation to engage in learning, making it difficult to plan and deliver education and interventions that will have a positive impact. On a day to day basis many children's education will be disrupted by other demands on their time – which

might be healthcare appointments or other interventions within the estate, legal or social work visits, or court dates.

It should be noted that the recording and reporting of educational needs differs vastly between each of the YOIs meaning it is difficult to combine or compare these insights effectively. For example, categories of SEND diagnoses, reporting of diagnosed or otherwise identified needs, and measurements of attendance in classes are not standardised across these settings. A national framework for measuring educational need in the secure estate would allow for a clearer and consistent national picture of this cohort and clearer understanding of services required.

4. Why isn't education in YOIs working for children?

Too often, education in YOIs is set up to fail, reflecting not a single weakness but the cumulative impact of many different factors. Children arrive with significant unmet educational needs and histories of disengagement, enter a custodial estate that is unstable and unsafe, with curriculum and qualification pathways that do not meet their needs or aspirations, and experience fragmented education provision that disrupt learning and undermine long-term educational outcomes.

4.1. The nature of the youth secure estate

"Education in YOIs is taking place in one of the most challenging environments. Teaching in the same way you would in a mainstream school is impossible when children are always being separated and inexperienced teachers are expected to respond to such a high level of need." – YOI staff

The operation of the wider estate is inseparable from the functioning of education. Repeated inspection reports show that YOIs fail to keep children safe, let alone provide quality education provision.

Children's access to education is directly affected by wider operational challenges, including the need to manage conflict between children who cannot safely associate, delays or failures in escorting children to education, and the high number of children who are separated from their peers and therefore unable to access the mainstream curriculum offer. These issues can reduce time in education, disrupt continuity of learning and limit access to courses and qualifications.

4.1.1. Separation of children

In 2023-24, HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) found that 479 children were separated from their peers, either because they posed a risk to safety, or because they were concerned about being involved in violence or scared to venture out.[57]

'Keep-aparts' are used to prevent children in conflict from mixing and, in some cases, are necessary to keep children safe. However, HMIP have repeatedly raised concerns that they are used too frequently, often in the absence of effective behaviour management and conflict resolution approaches.[58]

"Boys are going to be distracted [in lessons] if they are constantly looking over their shoulders in case they're about to get beaten up." – YOI staff

The impact on education is significant. 'Keep-aparts' can determine which classes, activities and vocational opportunities children can access, limiting choice and disrupting progression. They also create operational challenges that reduce time for learning. At one YOI managing safe movement between groups meant that children could spend up to 45 minutes returning from education to residential units. In some cases, children are effectively prevented from accessing courses that match their interests, abilities or future aspirations because of the logistical challenges of keeping groups separate.

"Behaviour, relationships and stability have to be addressed before anything." – Education professional

At one YOI Children's Commissioner staff heard how conflict resolution is used to support children address harm, rebuild relationships and develop non-violent ways of resolving disputes. Children are repeatedly offered opportunities to engage when they are ready, with the expectation that relationships can be repaired over time rather than conflicts simply managed through separation. The YOI's approach to conflict resolution was highlighted as good practice in a recent review of safeguarding in youth custody.[59]

4.1.2. Limited time out of cell

In 2024-25, HMIP found that only 61% of children reported spending more than two hours out of their cell on weekdays, fewer than half (45%) said this was the case at the weekend.[60] Some of this is driven by violence, conflict between children, extensive use of 'keep-aparts' and separation as well as weak relationships with staff, and children's disengagement from the regime.

"None of this is achievable without safety of regime, and while kids remain locked in their cell for hours." – Education provider

For children with SEND or poor mental health, long periods of confinement can be especially difficult and may exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Crucially, very little purposeful activity can take place when a child is confined to their cell for most of the day.

Furthermore, education in YOIs must compete with other demands. We heard repeatedly that healthcare appointments, therapeutic interventions, social care meetings and legal visits are often scheduled during the same periods. Many of these activities are essential and for some, such as court dates, there is very little flexibility. However, the cumulative effect is that children can miss large periods of education.

Staff told us that while there was a strong focus on increasing children's time out of their cell, minimal attention was paid to how that time was being spent. As a result, education might be cancelled or children would miss lessons without attracting the same level of concern, provided they were out of their rooms.

"Sometimes education just feels like something for them to do." – YOI officer

4.1.3. Physical space

Classrooms

Across the YOIs, classrooms were typically small, sparse and sterile in appearance. During our visits in summer 2026, extreme heat made conditions particularly challenging, with children in multiple YOIs reporting that classrooms became too hot to concentrate in, suggesting air conditioning as a priority.

"There's no pride in the classroom, they're stuffy and prison-like and there's nothing engaging to make the young people care." – YOI staff

In Feltham, Wetherby and Werrington, classrooms often had bare walls, limited displays and few of the examples of students' work or curriculum content typically associated with schools. The lack of displays did not seem to have been consciously and deliberately chosen to create a consistent and clean learning environment. Many rooms had small windows, sometimes covered by bars, creating an environment that felt more like a prison than a school.

"For some children, it felt like another secure place they didn't want to be in." – Education professional

Even where effort had been made to create more engaging classroom environments, the physical infrastructure of the YOI remained a barrier. In one of the YOIs, classrooms were better decorated, but they were still housed within small, converted prison cells. This reflects a broader challenge across the

youth estate: educational provision is often delivered in spaces that were never designed with children's learning and development in mind.

"The education environment was tired and uninspiring, with no evidence of celebration of achievement, aspiration or progression." – Education professional

Some children told us that they would like more learning opportunities outside of formal classroom settings, either on the wing or through increased one-to-one tuition. However, limited physical space in the estate serves as a significant barrier to delivering this.

Managing movement and regime change

The wider layout of the YOIs also affected access to education. In one of the YOIs, education facilities were spread across the site, meaning children and staff spent considerable time moving between lessons, disrupting the flow of the school day. By contrast, one of the YOIs we visited had a more compact layout which enabled children to move more quickly between lessons and return to the wing with minimal delay.

Staff told us this was compounded by the complexity of managing movement around the site. Officers did not always know which child they were taking to which location, as this can change almost daily in response to staff absences and incidents between children. As a result, movement to lesson is often slow, leading to delays and lost learning time.

"If you don't have the staff in the corridors to start movements, it's not safe to do so...there can be a lot of human error that contributes to boys turning up late for education." – YOI officer

4.1.3. Lack of shared behaviour policies across the estate

"Ultimately, the problem is a lack of standardised values, expectations and practices across the secure estate: that is how fragmentation manifests itself." – Educator

A consistent theme across youth custody is the lack of a shared approach to behaviour management between education, residential, and wider operational functions. Different parts of the YOI define success differently, creating uncertainty for children about what is expected of them.

For example, at one YOI, there was confusion about whether education staff could issue merits or demerits, and inconsistent approaches between functional skills and vocational provision, as well as between the education department and the wider estate. As a result, children can experience different expectations and consequences depending on where they are in the regime.

"It is often unclear how behaviour in one part of the institution influences incentives, rewards or sanctions elsewhere." – Education professional

Children reported frustration with inconsistent decision-making, made worse by frequent staff changes that mean that behaviour is handled differently by different members of staff. This can erode trust in staff and reduce children's confidence that concerns, including those relating to bullying or violence, will be dealt with fairly. HMIP reported that across the youth secure estate in 2025-26, only 35% of children thought that the system of rewards was fair, and 37% said that staff did not usually explain what they had done wrong if they got in trouble.[61]

The current approach to behaviour management also creates a cycle where teachers and children are set up to fail. Staff pointed to mainstream schools, where low-level disruption is typically managed by teachers and more serious incidents are escalated to senior leaders. At one of the YOIs, by contrast, staff reported that even relatively minor incidents could result in officers being called to remove a child from the classroom. This can weaken educational authority, disrupt learning and exclude children from lessons rather than supporting them to understand the impact of their behaviour.

"In any other school environment, behaviour management is escalated through the school. But in YOIs, we suddenly outsource that behaviour management straight to the officers – there's no 'let's talk about why your behaviour wasn't ok and this is how we're going to address it'. The kid just gets sent back to their cell." – YOI staff

The recent safeguarding review raised similar concerns about the separate and disconnected systems in YOIs which undermine behaviour management, relationships and safeguarding.[62]

4.2. Delivery of education

As detailed previously, education has a critical role to play in helping children in custody overcome significant disadvantage and prepare for successful lives beyond custody. The most significant factor in

a high-quality education is the quality of the teaching within it, but the way education is currently delivered does not maximise the chances of getting the best teachers into these classrooms Additionally, teaching takes place within a custodial environment that is often disruptive, under a commissioning model that often prioritises contract management over educational improvement, and with limited teaching time for a population with some of the highest levels of educational need in the country. These challenges are compounded by workforce pressures, inconsistent approaches across the estate, and the difficulty of meeting children's widely varied learning needs within the same classes. Together, these factors create an education system that struggles to provide the intensity, consistency and specialist support that children in custody require.

4.2.1. Quality of teaching

Isolation from gains in school improvement

Teaching children, especially children with high level of need, is a highly skilled profession, with good teachers using the best available pedagogical evidence, delivering well designed curricula, and being able to observe and learn from other highly skilled teachers. School reform in England over the past 20 years has meant that there are now schools in England that have all these elements in place – yet that resource is not being deployed into YOIs.

Children in custody are separated from the wider school improvement systems that drive educational quality in mainstream education. This fragmentation leads to inconsistent standards, practices and expectations across the secure estate, making it difficult to embed and sustain improvement.

The recent White Paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving, has set out that all schools should be part of a trust, whether a Multi-Academy Trust or local authority trust, in order for them to share this best practice and drive continual improvement; there is no such mechanism for shared learning or improvement of teaching quality in place for YOIs. As set out below, this is largely driven by the way the contracts are commissioned.

Low salaries and benefits

Staffing pressures further affect teaching quality. Recruitment and retention in YOIs can be challenging, primarily because education staff report that they are offered lower salaries, less favourable pensions

and fewer holiday entitlements than their counterparts in mainstream education. As a result, some teachers enter the role with limited prior teaching experience and work towards qualifications while in post. Managing the complex behaviour in custody requires highly developed behavioural management skills, yet many teachers are learning these skills in one of the most demanding educational environments.

"People are teaching here 'cos they can't get a job in schools – they don't have qualifications. That means we get a poor quality of teaching." – YOI staff

Strained relationships with custodial staff

These pressures can contribute to tensions between education and custody officers. Staff described frustrations around behaviour management, with officers feeling they were frequently called in by teachers to remove disruptive children when the priority should be supporting them to remain in lessons. Meanwhile, teachers felt that their safety was at times dismissed by officers when managing children's challenging behaviour.

"Officers don't trust educators – they think it's lazy when teachers call them in [to the classroom] for a minor incident. Teachers then don't trust that officers will look out for them. It breeds tension between the two." – YOI officer

At one of the YOIs, some staff reported reluctance to involve officers in incidents because they feared being perceived by children as having "reported" them. This can leave teachers feeling unsupported and contribute to strained relationships between children, teachers and youth custody officers.

4.2.2. Contract model

Contracts are not based around the needs of children in custody

The current contractors are delivered by external adult education and employment services, not registered schools or colleges. The contracting model is centred on commissioning an education service rather than establishing an institution that is culturally focussed on children's educational outcomes. The contracts are structured around service specifications, performance management and delivery requirements, reflecting their nature as outsourced education contracts.

This is particularly challenging given that children in YOIs have some of the highest levels of educational need in the country, including histories of exclusion, disrupted education, special educational needs and disabilities, unmet learning needs and poor educational experiences prior to custody.

The contracts include different outputs for the education contractor to achieve. These outputs include children's participation in education and ensuring children pursue education courses and learning activities based on their needs and aligned with resettlement planning and objectives. However, outputs related to children's engagement and progress with education often focus on timetabling, management controls and compliance.

Each contract sets out the Key Performance Indicators that a provider must meet, perhaps the most significant of which is that learners must make 'good progress'; however there are no robust, externally validated metrics for how this can be evidenced meaning that providers can determine their own targets for what 'good progress' looks like. Until this year the information management system in place within YOIs was based on adult learners, rather than children, meaning this kind of information was more challenging to consistently capture.

The YCS undertakes performance review meetings and contract review meetings with the education provider, which cover performance and compliance outcomes, and is able to place financial penalties on providers for not meeting their KPIs.

Competing objectives

While education providers are committed to improving outcomes for children and share the broader ambitions of YOI leaders, they are ultimately accountable for delivering against the objectives and KPIs set out in their contracts. This can create tension with the wider priorities of the YOI and with the educational vision of YOI leaders, particularly where safety, regime constraints and educational objectives are not aligned.

"Everyone is chasing their own KPIs – KPIs don't deliver quality education." – YOI staff

The three YOIs in England have different education providers, without a shared outcomes framework that defines what educational success should look like for children in custody. As a result, the educational experience a child receives can vary significantly between YOIs. For children who move

between YOIs, this can mean disruption to learning, differences in the curriculum offer, and inconsistent approaches to assessment, support and progression.

Lack of collaboration

As each YOI has a different education provider, working with different contractual arrangements, there are few incentives or mechanisms for providers to work together, share effective practice, or develop common approaches to curriculum design and progression.

"We don't speak to each other; there's no shared learning happening." – YOI education provider

This lack of coordination was particularly striking given how frequently children themselves compared experiences across the estate. Many children were able to describe the education, vocational opportunities and routines available in other YOIs because they had previously been held there or had spoken to peers who had transferred. In some cases, children appeared to have a better understanding of provision elsewhere in the estate than the staff responsible for delivering education.

"This is the most isolated I've ever felt as a senior manager." – YOI education provider

Even where the same organisation provided education in multiple YOIs, there was little evidence of collaboration. For example, we were told that while two of the YOIs we visited had the same education provider, there was no communication or shared learning between them.

4.2.4. Limited hours of education

Children in YOIs, as noted elsewhere in this report, are often working at a level below their age, and represent some of the highest need anywhere in our education system. While they are often of the age range associated with post-16 provision, their level of need and nature as a population in one place should mean they receive education more in line with that of a school. 15 hours, the current contracted amount, is reflective of general practice for some post-16 qualifications – qualifications that generally assume a level of previous educational attainment and self-direction.

In England, the length of the school day is broadly set by school leaders, academy leaders, and governors. In recent years, the Department for Education has published non-statutory guidance outlining the

expected length of the school week.[63] This is currently set as 32.5 hours of education a week, the equivalent of 6 and a half hours per school day. This expectation should be applied to children in YOIs.

Current provision consistently falls short of the statutory expectation of 15 hours of education per week, and many children experience extended blocks of English or Maths lessons lasting two hours, often driven by operational convenience.

Children told us that the wider regime restricted both their time out of cell and their access to education. At one of the YOIs, boys described being out of their cells for only short periods in the morning before attending two hours of education, returning to their cells or wing for lunch, completing a further two-hour education session, and then being locked up again from around 4pm. Further activities were then dependent on whether they had basic, standard or enhanced status.

"The [education] providers are finally achieving 11 hours a week – people were celebrating but it's still four hours short of the legal requirement. We're celebrating mediocrity here."– YOI staff

Children also reported finding long lesson blocks frustrating and difficult to engage with, particularly when they had little interest in the subject being taught. Several told us that shorter lessons helped to break up the day and provide greater variety, as if they were struggling to engage, they knew they would soon be moving on to a different lesson.

There is no compelling reason to keep a practice that children are reporting is frustrating and difficult. This is worsened by the lack of streaming – explored elsewhere in this report – and can mean children sitting in a long lesson where little learning is occurring.

"It's boring…you're just stuck in there for hours waiting for the lesson to end." - Child

Children told us they were frustrated with the ever-changing timetable. While they had access to their timetables through in-cell laptops, these were regularly updated with moved or cancelled lessons due to absent teachers and managing 'keep-aparts'.

"Every day I wake up to disappointment." – Child on absent teachers and cancelled lessons

4.2.5. Challenges of an inappropriate and unplanned curriculum

Children with different learning needs

A central challenge is that teachers are often required to deliver lessons to children with vastly different levels of attainment, language skills and learning needs. At one YOI, we observed lessons where children doing advanced work were taught alongside a child who spoke little or no English. Similarly, at another YOI, a functional skills English lesson included some children with considerable literacy difficulties alongside a child who had achieved a strong pass in GCSE English. Children themselves were acutely aware of these differences. The absence of appropriate progression routes can also limit engagement: the boy who had already achieved GCSE English was unclear what he was working towards next, as there were no Level 3 qualification pathways available.

This is in large part because of the inability of YOIs to stream in these crucial lessons. Children spoke about wanting "smart people in class together", reflecting frustrations with significant variations in learning needs within the same classroom. However, YOI staff told us that attempts to stream pupils had been undermined by the large number of 'keep-apart' arrangements.

"Imagine trying to teach six 17-year-old lads with ADHD and various special educational needs an English lit class...these teachers are absolutely worn to the bone because all they're doing is fighting fires rather than being able to genuinely properly teach." – YOI officer

Bringing together children with different learning needs can be extremely difficult to manage within a single classroom. Staff told us that teachers are frequently expected to navigate these complex dynamics alone, often without the additional specialist support that would typically be available in mainstream educational settings.

"In a normal school you'd have a teacher and a TA [Teaching Assistant] in half the classrooms and here you've just got one teacher with some really behaviourally difficult boys with no further support." – YOI staff

These challenges are compounded by the educational profiles of children entering custody. Many arrive having experienced periods of exclusion, or multiple school placements, and some are midway through qualifications that cannot easily continue in custody.

In particular, many children in YOIs have high levels of SEND, including autism and ADHD, often alongside behavioural needs and mental health issues.

Lack of tutoring provision

While opportunities for socialisation in group lessons are important, staff questioned whether a predominantly classroom-based approach is the most effective way to engage children with such complex needs.

"I think a lot of boys would benefit from just one or two of them in class, and there's not the capacity to do that." – YOI staff

Tutoring is a powerful intervention when applied with fidelity. The EEF find 1:1 tutoring adds an average of 4 months of additional progress to secondary school children who receive it.[64] Professor Becky Francis, author of the recent review of the curriculum in England's schools, has said that tutoring is '*one of the best evidenced interventions we have to support disadvantaged pupils' attainment.*'[65]. While YOIs are not schools, there is currently good reason to assume that tutoring would be effective in YOIs, as it is in other educational settings.

Tutoring is of particular interest in these settings because of its powerful impact on child literacy. Literacy is the bedrock upon which other learning is built, because learning materials are, by their very nature, delivered in written English. Explaining more complex topics in mathematics, or history, or indeed any subject, necessitates a child having the vocabulary to understand those topics, and the ability to read the written materials that may assist with understanding. The EEF notes that tutoring in English is especially beneficial (+6 months) compared to mathematics (+2 months). This means that for those young people who are in YOIs and struggling with literacy, tutoring represents a real chance for them to gain the literacy skills that will unlock the rest of the curriculum.

This is not to say that children should not continue to receive group education, or to denigrate the value of this education. But the challenges of teaching and learning in groups of children that are at vastly different levels, makes clear that there is currently insufficient learning taking place for too many children in too many lessons, particularly maths and English. In observed lessons, children were asked to work on worksheets that they felt had little relevance either to their wider education or their current level of ability.

While there are some instances of one-to-one teaching, these appear to be due to operational necessity rather than as part of a systematic educational offer. At one of the YOIs, for example, a child who was segregated received some individual tuition because he could not access mainstream classes. He had already achieved Level 2 qualifications and required more advanced and specialised learning. However, this provision was intermittent and dependent on staff balancing his needs against wider teaching arrangements and scheduling for the rest of the children in custody.

"I like it [tutoring] because the teacher knows what I want to work on and is patient with me." - Child

We saw elements of this approach working well in one of the YOIs we visited and the Secure School. However, these settings accommodated much smaller cohorts than most YOIs, making replication challenging. We also observed effective use of smaller learning spaces, including outdoor cabin classrooms, to deliver tutoring.

4.3. Design of curriculum

What children are taught matters as much as how they are taught. YOIs are not required to follow the national curriculum, but the 'core curriculum' set out in the contracts requires that they cover English, Maths, ESOL, ICT, Personal, Health, Social and Economic Education, as well as life skills and personal development activity. The delivery of vocational education 'pathways' is negotiated separately with the YCS.

Personal development provision is particularly fragmented and is not delivered through a coherent programme, making it difficult to establish a clear understanding of what is being delivered and what the intended outcomes are for children.

"A number of partners taught different elements of the education and personal development offer for the children. Leaders managed these discretely and did not have an accurate oversight of the full range of activities that the children were taking part in." – Ofsted inspection of Feltham YOI [66]

The Children's Commissioner has long maintained that Maths and English Level 2 qualifications are and remain the most important qualifications that a young person can obtain. But it is essential these are part of a broad curriculum with a clear purpose for setting children up for the world of work, and developing them socially and emotionally.

4.3.1. Limited curriculum

Literacy delivery

Many children arrive in custody with extensive gaps in literacy and numeracy, reflecting years of disrupted education and poor educational outcomes prior to entering custody.[67] Yet support to develop these foundational skills is often largely confined to formal English and maths lessons. The reforms made in mainstream education, particularly the implementation of systematic synthetic phonics, have delivered real improvements in the way that literacy is taught in English schools, reflected in the strong national performance in PISA scores for literacy. These approaches can and should be delivered in YOIs where there is a literacy need.

During visits, we saw little evidence of a whole-establishment approach to improving literacy. It was often unclear how children's literacy needs, including the needs of those with very low reading ages who may benefit from structured phonics-based approaches, were being systematically identified and supported. For example, in one of the English lessons children were independently reading different books, but it was unclear how the activity was being differentiated, how reading development was being assessed, or how targeted support was being provided to help children improve their literacy skills.

Beyond the classroom, opportunities to develop literacy skills appeared limited. We saw little evidence that reading was actively promoted across the YOIs or that staff outside education were equipped to support children's literacy development.

Vocational courses

Like many children in the community, in YOIs many children told us that they preferred practical learning and valued vocational subjects such as barbering, cooking and carpentry because they could see a clear connection between these courses and future employment.

"A lot of these boys want to be using their hands and doing things to learn - with English and maths lessons it's very rare that you're doing anything like this." – YOI staff

This was particularly evident at one of the YOIs, which offers construction, laundry, catering and forklift driving. Core subjects such as English, maths and PSHE are delivered within these vocational and industry zones, with teachers coming to children rather than requiring them to attend separate classrooms. The intention is to build on the motivation and engagement generated through vocational learning and to demonstrate the relevance of academic subjects by embedding them within practical activities. However, in practice the model appeared to serve only a relatively small number of the population.[68]

"There's a lack of creativity from teaching staff about how to help kids get qualifications." – YOI staff

Vocational courses don't always provide opportunities for progression. In some cases, children are encouraged to begin qualifications that they are unable to complete because of sentence restrictions or because they are not eligible for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). For example, at one of the YOIs, progression to a Level 2 bike maintenance qualification requires children to complete a road cycling test, meaning only those eligible for ROTL can complete the full course. As eligibility for ROTL becomes increasingly restricted for many children in YOIs, some cannot progress despite successfully engaging in earlier stages of the course.

Qualifications

"We're not aligned on what's more important – is it the qualification or making progress in their learning?" – Education professional

There also appeared to be limited understanding among staff and some children of the importance of English, maths and accredited qualifications in supporting future employment and educational progression. Children's views varied, but some expressed enthusiasm for vocational skills training but often struggled to see the relevance of core academic subjects to their future goals. Some staff similarly emphasised vocational learning as the primary route to engagement. While vocational education is crucial, this raises questions about whether sufficient emphasis is placed on helping children achieve qualifications, particularly Level 2 English and maths, which remain key gateways to employment, further study and entrepreneurship.

"Qualifications mean I have something to fall back on." – Child

Bridging courses

"I want more higher level courses... I left maths and English cos there was no step above level 2." - Child

Staff told us that the leap from Level 2 to Level 3 qualifications is often considered too significant within the constraints of a custodial sentence, resulting in some children returning to courses covering material they have already completed. The absence of clear pathways that bridge the gap between these qualifications risks stalling progress for more able and motivated learners.

"We're here aren't we? So we might as well get qualifications and make the time count." - Child

4.3.3. Children serving different sentence lengths

A further challenge is the high number of children who enter YOIs on remand or without a confirmed sentence. In HMIP's survey of children in custody, 40% of children reported being held on remand or awaiting sentence, meaning that children can have uncertain or potentially short periods in YOIs.[69]

The current model often struggles to meet the needs of both children on remand or serving short sentences and those serving longer periods in custody. Educational opportunities are frequently disrupted by transfers, release, or progression through the secure estate, making it difficult to deliver a curriculum that builds knowledge and skills over time.

At the Secure School, learning is structured around shorter, self-contained modules where children can complete short units of work regardless of how long they will be there. These units reflect core Level 2 English and maths skills, enabling children on both short and longer stays to make meaningful progress towards this qualification. Teachers reported that this approach also helps maintain motivation by providing children with more immediate success.

"There should be short courses that kids on remand can do – but for me, I want something that's going to help me with what I want to do in ten years' time." – Child

However, while shorter modules can support engagement and continuity, there remains a broader challenge in ensuring that education is responsive to children's pathways through the secure estate. We heard that some older children transfer to the adult estate before key information about their learning and achievements has even reached the prison – making it impossible to plan ahead and offer them the right opportunities in adult custody.

One child provided a particularly clear example of this challenge. He knew that he was going to transfer to the adult estate in the near future. He knew there would be a waste management course available and wanted to begin developing the relevant knowledge and skills before transfer. However, no equivalent pathway was available within the YOI, limiting his ability to work towards a goal that aligned with both his sentence length and future aspirations.

4.4. Information sharing and connections

4.4.1. Limited data and information sharing

A persistent barrier to meeting children's needs in custody is the poor transfer of information between community services and YOIs. Staff across YOIs reported that children frequently arrive with identified or suspected SEND, yet key information about their needs is often unavailable at the point of entry.

YOI staff reported that CAMHS assessments and reports are rarely shared with education services within the YOI, while Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are often delayed following admission to custody. This can prevent EHCPs from being updated as needed, and can therefore mean they become out of date. As a result, children often enter custody without staff having a full understanding of their learning needs, communication difficulties or required adjustments. This is particularly concerning given that children are often most vulnerable during their first weeks in custody. The absence of timely information risks needs being misunderstood, unmet or incorrectly managed.

These challenges are especially acute given the high prevalence of both identified and unidentified SEND within the YOI population, including autism, ADHD, speech and language difficulties, and learning disabilities.

"CAMHS information gaps are one of the major barriers to meeting children's needs." – YOI neurodivergence manager

"I wasn't aware that one of the children in our care has Autism until his mum phoned me to ask why his needs weren't being met, because the health team were not able to share the findings of his CAMHS assessment with me." – YOI SENCO

The NHS-commissioned Framework for Integrated Care, SECURE STAIRS, is used across the youth secure estate to address these challenges and acts as a trauma-informed joined-up systems approach to intervention, planning and care for children in custody.

4.4.2. Lack of responsibility for children with SEND

As detailed above, children with SEND continue to experience significant gaps in support when entering custody, transferring between YOIs and preparing for release. Responsibility for identifying, assessing and meeting need is often fragmented between home local authorities, host local authorities and YOIs, with no single body taking consistent ownership of ensuring that support follows the child throughout their time in custody.

This means that children in YOIs are often unable to access SEND resources and specialist provision available to children in the local community. Despite the high prevalence of SEND among children in custody, there remains uncertainty about whether current SEND reforms will address these barriers.

5. Recommendations

The need for urgent improvement in the provision of education in YOIs is clear. This report therefore sets out both a longer-term goal for the fundamental transformation of the youth custodial estate, as well as a series of changes that can and should be implemented urgently, largely without the need for legislative change or significant investment in new infrastructure.

Long-term goal: End the use of YOIs

YOIs are increasingly ill-suited to the needs of the small but highly complex population they now hold. Despite a reduction in the number of children in custody, persistent concerns around safety and violence, weak relationships with staff and poor educational outcomes continue to harm children and undermine efforts to prevent reoffending.

The government intends to publish its Youth Custody Transformation Plan later this year to address these longstanding concerns about the youth secure estate.[70] While this report focuses on improving education in YOIs, its recommendations directly support the objectives of the Transformation Plan and provide a practical route to achieving them. By creating a more child-centred learning environment, improving safety, and increasing access to meaningful education and purposeful activity, the recommendations will help ensure that children spend more time out of their cells and actively engaged in their development. This is not only beneficial for children but it's essential to delivering broader system reform. High-quality education can provide children with a sense of purpose, strengthen their understanding of themselves and their future aspirations, and equip them with the knowledge, qualifications and skills needed to successfully reintegrate into their communities on release. In doing so, improving education in YOIs has the potential to contribute directly to the Transformation Plan's aims of improving outcomes for children in custody, supporting effective resettlement, and reducing reoffending.

The Youth Custody Transformation Plan will also set out the government's ambition to transform the youth custody estate into a network of smaller therapeutic settings over the next ten years. While welcome, given the scale and urgency of the challenges facing YOIs, the Ministry of Justice must bring this timeline forward. The changes recommended in this report demonstrate that many of the foundations of a therapeutic model, including safer environments, stronger relationships, greater access

to education, and a more tailored approach to meeting children's needs, can begin to be implemented now.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) should therefore set out how, within the next three years, a model of therapeutic care for children in need of secure care will be rolled out across the youth custody estate. This must be based on a model of smaller settings that are closer to where children live and should include a plan to phase out all YOIs and Secure Training Centres (STCs). A comprehensive, long-term strategy for its development should include step down services for when children are ready to move on from secure provision, into gradually more open settings. These should be organised regionally to enable children to be as close to home as possible

Recommendations for the wider youth secure estate

Poor educational outcomes in youth custody are not the result of a single operational failure, but of systemic weaknesses across the secure estate. A lack of clarity about the purpose of custody, inconsistent approaches to behaviour management, policies designed primarily for adult prisons, the separation of children and limited time out of cell, and weak integration between education, custody and pastoral support all undermine children's ability to engage in learning and make progress. Improving educational outcomes will require a more child-centred approach to custody, with education embedded within the wider goals of personal development and preparation for life beyond custody. These recommendations apply across all YOIs in England and Wales, while those recommendations about the contracts held by the YCS apply only to the publicly run prisons in England

- **Recommendation:** The MoJ must establish an agreed purpose of children's custody, which should include promoting the personal development of children in order to prevent them reoffending, and enabling them to fully participate in society.

- **Recommendation:** All settings should have a consistent set of behaviour policies, making clear that they should act as one institution working towards the same outcomes, and joint training on the implementation of those policies and best practice in behaviour management. The behaviour policies currently in place are not always consistent in YOIs – and it is unclear how good or bad behaviour in one domain affects children's rewards or punishments in another.

- **Recommendation:** Too many failings within youth custody stem from the fact it is children's provision within an adult service. It is essential that the YCS introduce separate policies on education, safeguarding, time out of cell, safety and risk for the youth estate which cannot simply be copied from the adult estate, and which should acknowledge that the welfare of children must be their primary consideration.

- **Recommendation:** The MoJ and YCS should introduce greater scrutiny of the use of keep-apart arrangements. All decisions to separate children from their peers should follow a formal process involving both education and YCS operational staff, which considers the educational consequences for children. If staff wish to put in place a non-association which would affect their ability to participate in a chosen educational pathway, this recommendation must be approved by the Governor. The Governor should also have to sign off a child's withdrawal from education.

- **Recommendation:** Every child should have a designated youth justice worker, building on the aims of the Custody Support Plan, who should be included in any decisions about educational options, and be invited to regular 'parents' evening' check-ins with education.

- **Recommendation:** All YOIs should also provide for in-person parents' evenings, with children's family members or primary carers.

Recommendations for improving the quality of education

The most important factor in the quality of education a child receives is the quality of their teacher. Currently education in YOIs is delivered by contracted providers who are not specialists in educating children. It hasn't drawn on the huge recent improvements in the quality of teaching and education in England, and crucially it isn't structured for the needs of children in YOIs. Given the focus of these recommendations, they are applicable only to YOIs in England.

New providers

- **Recommendation**: The three current contracts in the English YOIs should be terminated at the next break clause to allow an improvement intervention. This should be done to enable a time-limited, direct intervention in the secure estate as a response to long term failings and the ongoing decline in educational standards. The Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education

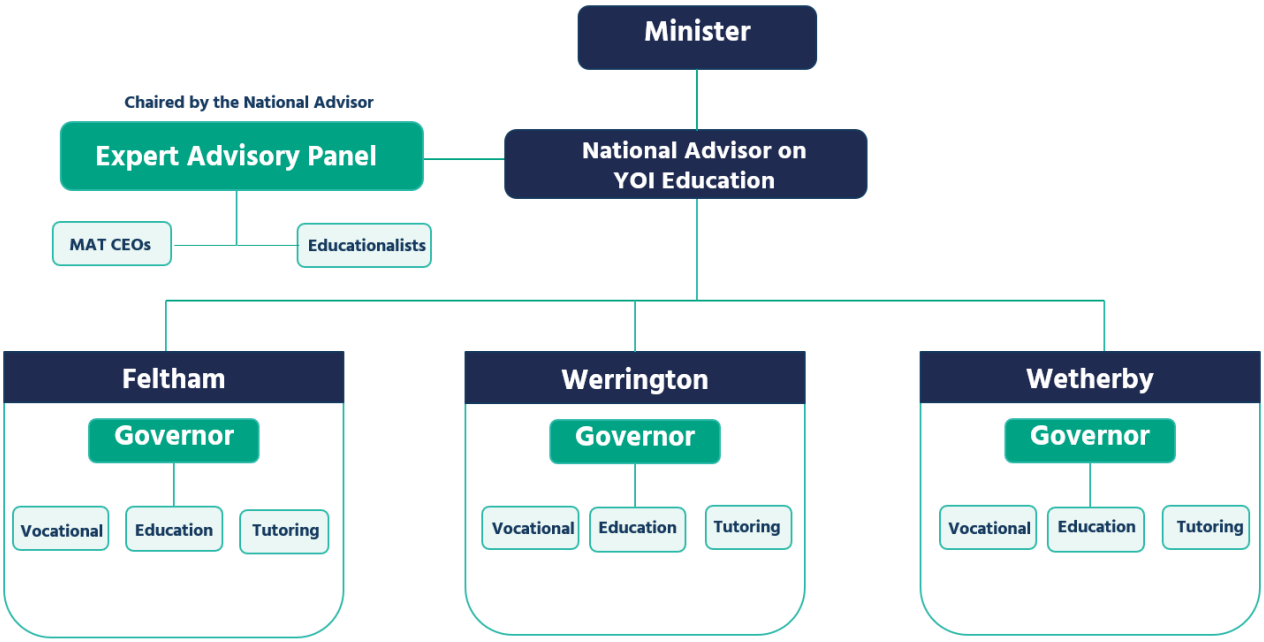
and the newly appointed National Advisor on Education in YOIs should work together to identify and bring forward outstanding education providers to deliver education in YOIs.

- **Recommendation**: Three new funding arrangements should be drawn up that require that those delivering education should be:
    - A registered education provider with a proven track record of excellent education provision, particularly for students displaying challenging behaviour or who have been excluded from other settings;
    - Part of a network of schools with an outstanding track record which will provide continuous professional development, curriculum, and pedagogical support for the YOI provider
    - Evidence of how they would deliver core literacy requirements for this cohort, particularly phonics for secondary school aged children
    - Be able to deliver an outstanding vocational education curriculum – either directly or in partnership;
    - Able to demonstrate a model for the personal development element of the curriculum tailored for this unique cohort; and
    - Have either the internal capacity, or a partnership with another provider, to deliver tutoring.
- **Recommendation:** The revised funding arrangements must clearly set out how providers will meet children's entitlements to support for special educational needs within the custodial estate, for children with EHCPs as well as those who do not meet the threshold for a plan. The costs of that provision should be included in funding arrangements.
- **Recommendation:** Given the complexity in managing children with very different levels and sentence duration, and the number of 'keep-aparts' which govern children's subject choices, there should be an increase in one-to-one tutoring. The next provider must be required to provide tutoring in their education delivery.

Accountability

- **Recommendation**: The headteachers of these three new providers would be directly accountable to the Governors within the YOI, and a newly appointed National Advisor on Education in YOIs, at the most senior level. This role should report directly into the Minister with responsibility for Youth Justice. In addition, they should report against progress children are making to an Expert Advisory Panel made up of leading CEOs and educationalists who will be supporting the development and delivery of education in YOIs. The panel members should work together to develop shared materials, approaches and training across all YOIs including on:
    - The most effective training on behaviour management, with a rigorous underpinning that challenges broad-brush terminology like 'trauma-informed';
    - Effective pedagogy, based on methods proven to be effective with similar cohorts;
    - A world class curriculum that is focused on character development;
    - Highly effective vocational education provision tailored to this cohort; and
    - The use and provision of targeted 1 to 1 tuition, particularly focussed on literacy and numeracy.

- **Recommendation:** The new funding arrangements should set out clear accountability and escalation processes, ensuring that concerns can be raised through both the National Adviser on YOI Education and the individual education provider CEOs where necessary.



Funding

- **Recommendation:** The MoJ should deliver additional funding to support the model made up of:
    - An Innovation Fund for charities or education providers to bid for developing any elements of the curriculum which are required, such as age-appropriate phonics, extracurricular activities, and flexible stretch work for children with particular interests and abilities; and
    - A sufficiently resourced Capital Fund for delivering additional space for vocational courses and one to one tutoring.

In the long run, high-quality education could be delivered under a number of structures. The key focus for the next three years should be getting the best educators and teachers in the country and in front of children in YOIs.

Pay, condition and hours

- **Recommendation:** Teachers in YOIs should have consistent or directly comparable pay and the same conditions as teachers in other school settings. However, given the nature of the secure estate, YOIs should continue to teach year round, without set holiday periods. While holiday periods should not mirror mainstream schools, children should have regular short breaks from formal learning, with enrichment activities available during these periods.

- **Recommendation:** All YOIs should be required to deliver at least 30 hours of education, including timetabled education and 1:1 tutoring, across a timetable that resembles a mainstream school in terms of time spent in education. The Ministry of Justice should publish monthly data on how much education is delivered.

Recommendations for designing the curriculum

The education offer in YOIs is not sufficiently designed around the needs, development and future aspirations of the children it serves. Too many children enter custody with low literacy, while access to meaningful vocational opportunities, structured character development and clear progression pathways remains inconsistent. It must be designed to reduce reoffending, for the sake of children in custody and their victims.

In particular, the current approach does not adequately reflect the different circumstances of children on remand, serving short sentences or moving into adulthood. A more personalised model is needed, with literacy at its core, guaranteed access to vocational learning, and pathways that support successful progression into education, training and employment.

- **Recommendation:** The curriculum for a YOI should retain the current elements of English, Maths, ESOL and PSHE, but should add a requirement for personal development education which should be developed into an explicitly taught and timetabled model of personal development.

- **Recommendation:** A central goal of all education in YOIs must be improving literacy – to deliver the English requirement of the core curriculum, an age appropriate phonics curriculum must be in place for those who need it, and providers will be required to demonstrate proven models of delivery.

- **Recommendation:** Age-appropriate, evidence based baseline testing should be a key part of every child's induction into the secure estate where information about a child's level of learning cannot be provided by their pre-custody school or educational institution. That information should be used to determine what a child should learn and the level of progress they should make, including towards qualifications, with robust measures on what counts as good progress.

- **Recommendation:** Education providers should develop a curriculum that provides explicit teaching for personal development. That could be done in a number of ways including through a literacy programme, wider enrichment, or work-related learning. That should include support for every child from their designated youth justice worker who should receive training and instruction in how to support a child's personal development.

- **Recommendation**: Every child should have a guaranteed place on a vocational course. The government's response to the Milburn review should establish the most appropriate vocational courses to prevent children in YOIs from becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), which should be delivered across all settings. No vocational courses should be offered to children which, for safety or sentencing reasons, they cannot complete. The Ministry of Justice should provide additional capital expenditure for any new learning spaces required to deliver these courses.

- **Recommendation**: Education providers should develop modular courses to enable students to work towards Level 3 qualifications, to bridge the current gap for students who have completed Level 2 qualifications.

- **Recommendation:** Three separate pathways should be developed for children on remand and short sentences, those who will be released as children, and those going into the adult estate.

    - There should be short, modular courses developed for children on remand or short sentences – including 'stepping stone' qualifications for those working towards Level 2.

- Children who will be released as children must have education places secured on release and be able to do distance learning or pre-engagement with that provider.
- Children going into the adult estate must be able to complete qualifications that they will be able to build on in the adult estate, or which jobs in the adult estate require.

Recommendations for information sharing and improving connections

The current system places the burden of navigating fragmented services on some of the most vulnerable children in custody. Weak information sharing, inconsistent transfer of health and education records, and a lack of clear responsibility for children with SEND mean that support is too often disrupted at precisely the point when children are most vulnerable, highlighting the need for a more integrated and accountable model of oversight and care

- **Recommendation:** There should be one consistent data sharing platform across all YOIs, where information from services both prior to children entering custody and in custody should be recorded. Each child should have one consistent custody plan on the platform.
- **Recommendation:** The Department for Education should implement the single unique identifier, as provided for in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act, to allow for more effective data matching and sharing for all children in England, including all children in custody.
- **Recommendation:** All children in YOIs should have looked after child status, and the Virtual School Head of their home local authority should be responsible for working with the education provider in the YOI to plan their transition back into education in the community, or liaising with the education provider in the adult estate they will be moving to.
- **Recommendation**: Any child with an EHCP when they enter a setting must have it reviewed jointly by their home local authority and the YOI upon entry; no child should have an EHCP paused or ended on entry to a YOI and the revised EHCP should be incorporated into their single learning plan setting out how their needs will be met in custody.
- **Recommendation:** All YOIs should have Release on Temporary License (ROTL) schemes to allow children, wherever possible, to participate in education in the setting in which they will be

enrolled upon release, or to complete elements of vocational qualifications. YOIs should strengthen relationships with education providers, training organisations and employers to provide equivalent engagement for children who are not eligible for ROTL.

- **Recommendation:** The MoJ should ensure that any information management system it uses is shared across the youth estate, and can include relevant information from education, health and youth justice services which follows children seamlessly into and between custodial settings. To enable this each YOI should ensure that it has robust data sharing agreements. The agreements should be made with all of the services which children come into contact with within the YOI and align with the principles set out in the government's recently consulted upon Information Sharing Guidance,[71] and align with the Information Sharing Duty as set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act.[72]

Annex – Provider KPIs

The KPI framework presented in the table below is from Appendix B (Key Performance Indicators and Remedies) of Schedule 14 (Performance Management) in the MoJ's education services contract for HMPYOI Feltham.[73] It provides an example of the contractual performance measures, targets, reporting requirements and remedies applied to the education provider.

The table is specifically referencing the contractual KPIs that the education provider, Shaw Trust, was required to meet under the Feltham education services contract.

APPENDIX B – KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND REMEDIES

KPI Description	Measure of KPI	Performance Target	Reporting Frequency	Start Date	Bedding-In Period (following relevant Start Date)	Remedy (without prejudice to other remedies including in the Agreement)
Every child or Learner has a Baseline Education assessment completed for every child and Learner within five (5) Working Days of entry to the Secure Setting.	Percentage of new entrants who have had their Baseline Education assessment completed within five (5) Working days of entry to the Secure Setting. = Total number of new entrants who have had their Baseline Education assessment completed within five (5) Working Days of entry to the Secure Setting × 100 ÷ Total number of children or Learners who have entered the Secure Setting within each Payment Period	100%	Monthly	From Services Commencement Date [SCD]	100% of new assessments (using Supplier's new assessment model) in time for the next formulation (up to 6 weeks after 1 Sep 2022 (i.e. 100% of new assessments completed for all those in custody Friday 14 October 2022))	Service Points: 9 points per month
Every child or Learner has an individualised Education and Learning Plan that reflects their most recent Formulation and is demonstrably informed by baseline assessment.	Percentage of new entrants who have had their Individualised Education and Learning Plan completed within five (5) Working Days after their Formulation meeting. = Total number of new entrants who have had their Individualised Education and Learning Plan completed within five (5) Working Days after their Formulation meeting in each Payment Period ÷ Total number of children or Learners who have had a Baseline Education assessment within each Payment Period	100%	Monthly	From SCD	100% of new entrants from 1 Sep 2022 100% of learning plans for existing learners (up to 6 weeks after 1 Sep 2022 (ie 100% of all learning plans completed for all those in custody by	Service Points: 9 points per month

KPI Description	Measure of KPI	Performance Target	Reporting Frequency	Start Date	Bedding-In Period (following relevant Start Date)	Remedy (without prejudice to other remedies including in the Agreement)
	Exceptions: e.g. those going on trial, those with medical issues				Friday 14 October 2022)	
Target Supplier Staffing Levels are in place and are in line with the Target Staffing Model within agreed tolerances.	Measure against staffing profile provided by the Supplier (incl the specific staff as set out in the Delivery Plan).	All staff to be in place (including existing staff TUPEing over and new staff (appropriately cleared) from 1 Sep 2022. 100% of staff in place from 1 Sep 2022 as per Delivery Plan. Staffing levels should fulfil minimum 15hrs learner hours per Learner.	Monthly	From SCD		Service Points: 14 points per month.
Head of Education post is occupied	Head of Education post is occupied on a permanent contractual basis for each calendar day of each calendar month. Evidence to be provided that Head of Education has been hired on a permanent basis (e.g. by sharing the contract) After 12-week period of post being with sliding scale of financial remedy (e.g. up to 115-125% of cost of Head of Ed being deducted from monthly payments per month after 12 weeks)	Head of Education post 100% occupied over the month (with 12 week maximum period of substantive (ie recruited for on a permanent basis) post holder vacancy. Head of Education has an education qualification and has (or on appointment is willing to work towards) a nationally	Monthly	From SCD	No bedding-in period	See paragraph 7.4

KPI Description	Measure of KPI	Performance Target	Reporting Frequency	Start Date	Bedding-In Period (following relevant Start Date)	Remedy (without prejudice to other remedies including in the Agreement)
		recognised education leadership qualification.				
'Overall effectiveness is rated "Good" by Ofsted.	'Overall effectiveness' assessed by Ofsted	See paragraph 1 of Appendix C below	Annually	The first deduction period as described in Appendix C		See paragraph 1 of Appendix C below
On reviewing Education and Learning plans, children and Learners must have made 'Good' progress whilst in custody. Including those with LDD and SEND needs.	The Authority will develop in collaboration with the Supplier a reporting regime against this KPI over Year 1 of the Contract: Percentage of children and Learners making 'Good' educational progress whilst in custody = Number of Individualised Education and Learning plans reviewed in a one (1) month period where progress is assessed as being 'Good' ÷ Number of Education and Learning plans reviewed in a one (1) month period × 100	100% Performance will be benchmarked over Contract Year 1 of the Contract. Subsequently, the Authority will revise and set the target percentage.	Monthly (or alignment with formulation processes (every 6 weeks))	From end December	No bedding-in period	9 points
Overall effectiveness is rated 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'	'Overall effectiveness' is assessed by Ofsted (as part of an annual 'Full inspection' as being 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'.	The annualised HMIP / Ofsted inspection of the Secure Setting will provide independent measure against this KPI.	Annually	From the second Ofsted inspection rating received after SCD		25 points (for the avoidance of doubt applicable annually)

KPI Description	Measure of KPI	Performance Target	Reporting Frequency	Start Date	Bedding-In Period (following relevant Start Date)	Remedy (without prejudice to other remedies including in the Agreement)
The Supplier shall provide information required by the Authority regularly and in a timely manner.	i. Management Information requirements, as specified in this Schedule are complied with and delivered to the Authority according to the specified timelines. ii. Any reasonable request for information made by the Authority Representative in writing to the Supplier will be fulfilled within ten (10) business days of said notice, unless explicitly specified otherwise. The authority will make clear where such requests for information are being made under this KPI.	i. Points applied for each MI report stipulated but not provided. ii. Points applied for each incident where request for information is not provided within timeframe. Points will apply for every additional business day elapsed until request fulfilled.	Monthly	SCD	4 months (from SCD)	Service Points: 1 point per report or request per day of lateness. For the avoidance of doubt, the total service points available in a month in relation to this KPI shall not apply to the MTSP when calculating Service Credits in Schedule 2

Source: Education Services at HMPYOI Feltham, Schedule 14 – Performance Management, pages 210–217.

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