



Department of
Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Máinnystrie o tha Laa



Strategic Framework for Youth Justice

Annual Progress Report 2025/26

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

The Strategic Framework for Youth Justice committed the Department to publishing an annual update to keep stakeholders informed on progress made in delivering on the high-level outcomes set out in the framework. This is the fourth annual report and provides information relating to Year 4 of the five-year action plan, covering 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

Background

The first Strategic Framework for Youth Justice (SFYJ) in Northern Ireland was launched by the Justice Minister in March 2022. It was developed in partnership by the Department of Justice (DoJ) and the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) and was informed by the views of stakeholders as well as a range of expert reviews and reports on the youth justice system.

The vision for the five-year Framework is for “*a progressive youth justice system – delivering better outcomes for children and communities*” and the following 4 high-level outcomes were identified as being key to ensuring the achievement of this vision:

1. Children are exited from the justice system at the earliest point, with appropriate support;
2. Positive outcomes for children, families, victims and communities affected by offending;
3. Children will only ever be placed in custody as a last resort; and
4. Working in partnership to deliver wider, systemic change to improve the lives of children.

The original action plan, which was developed alongside the SFYJ, contained a total of 16 actions for delivery over the term of the Framework, split between the above-mentioned four outcomes. These were to be led by three organisations – the Department of Justice, the Youth Justice Agency and the Regional Care and Justice Programme Team and delivered with the assistance of a range of key partners including the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNi), the Office of the Lady Chief Justice (LCJO), the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) and third sector organisations.

The actions were also designated a timeframe during which they should be completed. The timeframes are split between ongoing, short-term (within one year), medium-term (two to three years) and long-term (four to five years).

Strategic Framework for Youth Justice Implementation Group

In order to ensure effective implementation of the SFYJ, an Implementation Group was established in July 2022, comprised of the lead organisations involved in delivering the action plan, as well as representation from the children's sector non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This Group is chaired by a senior official from Reducing Offending Division within the Department of Justice and meets three times a year. During the third year of implementation of the Framework, the Group agreed to expand its membership in order to strengthen strategic links with key partners. New members were at that stage drawn from the following organisations:

- PSNI
- Department of Health
- Office of the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

An updated Terms of Reference document was agreed following the expansion of the group and this is attached for reference at **Annex A**.

While the SFYJ is a final document, the accompanying action plan is a living document and will continue to be added to and amended during the lifespan of the Framework, to reflect completed or amended actions and new emerging priorities. All amendments will be subject to the agreement of the Implementation Group. The publication of this annual update provides an opportunity to share with stakeholders the latest version of the action plan, including any revisions, alongside information on the progress made in delivering against all outstanding actions.

A decision has been taken to extend the **Strategic Framework for Youth Justice** and its associated action plan for a further year. This reflects the fact that the four outcomes, as set out on the previous page, remain the key priorities for delivering change in respect of youth justice policy and practice. The annual review and refresh of the action plan has enabled the SFYJ Implementation Group to ensure that it remains relevant, responsive to emerging developments, and aligned with current priorities and trends. This short extension will take us into the next mandate, enabling the priorities of the Justice Minister in office at that time to be taken into account alongside any wider strategic developments.

Engagement with children and young people

Ensuring the voices of children, young people and their families were heard and taken account of was a key element in the development of the Framework and continues to be important in implementing actions aimed at improving outcomes for those in contact with the youth justice system. The views of those with lived experience of the system, and those of their parents/carers, are particularly beneficial in informing policy and service development as work under the SFYJ progresses. Information in relation to engagement with these key stakeholders as part of the delivery of work in Year Four is provided throughout the following sections of this report.

Changing landscape

Since the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice was published in March 2022, there have been a number of changes to the strategic context in which the Framework operates. A key change relates to the Regional Care and Justice Campus Programme, which was ongoing at the time of publication. The Programme was established in order to facilitate the introduction of an integrated regional care and justice campus for children and young people in Northern Ireland. Subsequent to publication of the SFYJ, the Justice Minister and the Health Minister agreed instead to pursue a harmonisation option for Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) and Lakewood Regional Secure Care Centre. This placed the focus instead on the harmonisation and sharing of services across both the Lakewood and Woodlands sites, with current governance and accountability structures remaining in place.

In June 2023, a report on the independent review of children's social care services, led by Professor Ray Jones, was published. This report included 53 recommendations aimed at ensuring that children's services would become more proactive in terms of providing family support and reducing harm. One of the key recommendations was the establishment of a children and families' arms-length body in Northern Ireland. An exercise was undertaken during the course of 2025/26 to scope the feasibility of delivering upon this recommendation, taking account of the current budgetary challenges faced by the Departments of Health and Justice. While both Ministers agreed that it could not be progressed at this time, the work carried out to date will provide a solid basis should future Ministers wish to take this forward.

Work to improve outcomes for children and families continues, however, through the Children's Social Care Services Reform Programme, which has been established to address the complex challenges within children's social care in Northern Ireland. This Programme has the potential to deliver regionalisation of services without structural change, through new regional plans for children's residential and foster care. In addition, a new regional model of family support for Northern Ireland has been developed called *Together for Families*. Public Sector Transformation Funding and matched National Lottery Community Fund funding of almost £60m in total over 3 years (to March 2029) has been secured to implement the model. *Together for Families* is a relational, tiered, neighbourhood-based model for children, young people and families, focused on prevention and early intervention.

All of this work has a considerable overlap with the SFYJ, given the overrepresentation of looked after children in the justice system. In recognition of this, a representative from the Department of Health sits on the Implementation Group to inform the work and strengthen partnerships.

Key strategies and action plans, the delivery of which will have impacts for children in contact with the justice system, have also been developed since 2022. These include the Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy; the Child Criminal Exploitation Action Plan; and action plans to support women and girls in the justice system. In

addition, a new Programme for Government (PfG) was agreed in 2025. PfG highlights the need for trauma-informed, responsive systems to be embedded throughout and includes safer communities as one of the nine key priority areas.

SUMMARY OF PROGRESS IN YEAR FOUR 2025/26

Outcome 1

Children are exited from the justice system at the earliest point, with appropriate support.

Priority Activity - justice organisations are to work collaboratively with other statutory and third sector partners to help children avoid entering, or moving further into, the formal justice system.

Context

Evidence points towards early intervention as being key to delivering better long-term outcomes for children and young people, whether these outcomes relate to education, health or involvement in the justice system. The number of children entering the justice system has seen a comprehensive reduction in the past decade, largely due to the focus on the implementation of diversionary initiatives aimed at preventing children from entering or moving further into it. This was demonstrated in the SFYJ by highlighting the following figures:

- a 54% reduction in the number of children entering the justice system for the first time for offending behaviour¹, from 1,555 children in 2011/12 to **710** children in 2019/20; and
- a 59% reduction in the number of cases involving children dealt with by the youth courts², from 3,023 in 2011 to **1,256** in 2019.

Further reductions were evidenced in reports subsequently published:

- In 2024/25, the number of children entering the justice system for the first time for offending behaviour³ was **599** of which **86%** were diverted;
- In 2025, the number of cases involving children dealt with by the youth courts⁴ was **1,025**.

Actions and Progress Update

	Action	Progress
1.1	Develop and deliver Earlier Stage Diversion (ESD), in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations, in order to exit children from the criminal justice system at the earliest possible stage, with appropriate support.	Earlier Stage Diversion (ESD) continues to be delivered by YJA in partnership with Justice and other partners. As reported through YJA's annual performance impact reports , it continues to be successful in preventing children entering the formal justice system. During 2024/25 (latest available figures), through its ESD programme, the YJA provided funding for targeted

¹ First time entrants to the criminal justice system 2019/20 - NISRA

² Judicial Statistics 2019 - NISRA

³ First time entrants to the criminal justice system 2024/25 - NISRA

⁴ Judicial Statistics 2025 - NISRA

	Action	Progress
	Lead – YJA	diversionary interventions, support for 227 children and funded 12 voluntary sector organisations to complete diversionary activity for groups of children at risk of or involved in offending behaviour. 91 workshops were delivered in 36 schools to over 4,000 pupils and staff. In the 2025/26 business year, YJA focused on consolidating a range of ESD initiatives, including Children's Diversion Forums, the Community Resolution Notice Referral Scheme and ESD funding. In the next business year, subject to funding and staffing capacity, YJA would be keen to work in partnership to further develop ESD, including within the children's residential care sector. Action complete - business as usual.
1.2	Amended Year 4 action: Work with partners to implement the findings and recommendations of the external evaluation of Children's Diversion Forums. Lead – YJA	All recommendations from the evaluation of Children's Diversion Forums have now been completed, including strengthening partnerships with relevant organisations and updating the Children's Diversion Forums' Guidance. Action complete – business as usual.
1.3	Ongoing work with PPS & PSNI to develop proposals for new diversionary disposal which does not attract a criminal record Lead – YJA	The new diversionary disposal has been designed with PSNI and PPS and a pilot was commenced in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon areas in January 2025. The pilot is aimed at improving outcomes for children who have committed offences which exceed the current Community Resolution Notice threshold but where a diversionary disposal may still be appropriate, alongside the provision of support. It involves a 10-12 week intervention working with the YJA. Referrals to the pilot were initially low, but a change in procedures has led to a rise in the number of referrals. Plans to extend the pilot into the Newry, Mourne and Down area are being finalised and this will be rolled out in 2026/27.
1.4	Support PSNI review of Community Resolution Notices with the aim of extending offences covered by a CRN, subject to appropriate YJA staffing levels. Lead – YJA	Action completed in 2024/25 – no further update.

	Action	Progress
1.5	New Year 4 action Liaise with the Home Office over the introduction of a new Youth Diversion Order for terrorism-related offences which is being introduced in NI through the UK Crime and Policing Bill Lead – DoJ	During the reporting period, DoJ and criminal justice organisations worked with the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice on the development of provisions to introduce a new Youth Diversion Order (YDO) for children and young people up to the age of 21. The provisions are included in the Crime and Policing Act 2026 and will be commenced by order. YDOs are civil orders aimed at diverting young people involved in low level terrorism-related offences from the formal justice system. Work will be undertaken during 2026/27 on plans for implementing the new YDOs in Northern Ireland.

Outcome 2

Positive outcomes for children, families, victims and communities affected by offending.

Priority activities identified under this outcome are:

- to simplify and streamline the current provision of community orders;
- to deliver enhanced engagement and support for the most complex cases; and
- to develop and deliver YJA's Model of Practice workstreams for continuous service improvement.

Context

Offending behaviour by children not only affects the individual but impacts on their families, schools and communities, not to mention the significant harm it causes to victims. Therefore, actions which improve outcomes for children in contact with the justice system, will also have a beneficial impact on others affected by youth offending.

As has been highlighted in previous annual reports, the number of children being prosecuted at court and receiving diversionary disposals has decreased in recent years and this trend appears to be continuing. However, in the past three years, the number of referrals per individual child has been higher than for previous years. This supports reports from those working with children who offend who state they are dealing with increasingly complex needs, including mental health problems, addiction issues and difficulties accessing mainstream education or training opportunities.

In terms of demographics, there have been increased levels of referrals to youth justice services amongst the 10–13-year-old cohort and amongst girls. For both categories, the number of individuals referred has remained largely static, indicating that the rise in referrals is due to multiple referrals which points towards a greater level of re-offending and greater complexity of need. Another concerning factor is the increase in referrals for looked after children.

It is vital that youth justice disposals and services continue to respond to the changing needs of those in our care and adapt when necessary. Supporting and challenging children to help them to change behaviours which lead to offending is essential if we are to create fewer victims and safer communities.

Actions and Progress Update

	Action	Progress
2.1	Introduce a new flexible order to replace the existing 7 community orders based on current evidence and best practice. Lead – DoJ	A 12-week public consultation was undertaken between April and July 2025 to seek views from the public in relation to the key characteristics and requirements of a new single community order. A child-friendly consultation document was also produced as part of the process to capture the views of those who would be most impacted by a change to the legislation. This was developed with the assistance of the YJA Participation Officer. Whilst the response rate to the consultation was low (30 responses in total), the majority of the responses were very comprehensive and provided both detailed rationale and supporting information. A consultation summary response document was published by the Department in November 2025 and this indicated strong support for the majority of the key characteristics and requirements proposed in relation to the new order. During the remainder of the reporting period, the Task and Finish Group established to deliver this work met to work through and agree a number of decisions required following the consultation process. During the next reporting period, the focus will be on finalising the operational aspects of the new order and drafting instructions for the Office of the Legislative Counsel in order to ensure that provisions introducing the new order are ready to be introduced via an appropriate legislative vehicle in the next mandate.
2.2	Year 4 Amended Action – Consider and implement actions to improve the experiences of youth court hearings for children and their families, informed by problem solving and trauma-informed approaches, and the views of stakeholders. Lead – DoJ	Through the work of the Task and Finish Group set up to deliver improvements for young people and their families in relation to youth courts, a number of actions were completed in year 4. These included: The Youth Justice pages on the DoJ website were redesigned, with a dedicated section providing advice for children and families appearing before the youth court. New resources have been added including: five 3D ‘virtual courtroom tours’ of the most commonly used youth courts; and a short video which outlines the full process from when the young person receives their summons letter through to sentencing.

	Action	Progress
		• Work has been undertaken with the Law Society of NI and the Children's Law Centre to develop a survey to identify training needs amongst the legal profession. The intention is to use the information to develop a training module which will help solicitors to better support children who offend. The survey ran on Citizen Space from January to May 2026. • Scoping work was undertaken in relation to both child advocacy and peer mentoring schemes for children, to consider the provision of improved support for them as they go through the youth court process. • Reducing Offending Division staff carried out a number of visits to youth courts in NI in order to identify whether any improvements could be observed since the previous round of visits carried out in 2023. The outcome of these was reported back to the T&F group.
2.3	Develop and deliver an Enhanced Case Management (ECM) framework for children who pose a high risk of significant harm and/or who have complex needs. Lead – YJA	Action completed in 2024/25 – now business as usual.
2.4	Short-term Model of Practice improvements: (i) Rolling out the YJA-HSC joint CAMHS service across NI to provide effective access to mental health support services for children in the justice system (subject to budget availability); (ii) Improving employability among 16 and 17 year olds in the justice system by developing a wider set of partnerships and improving connections to existing services. (iii) Improving support for the families of children in the justice system both through direct delivery by YJA and	The joint CAMHS/YJA service has now been rolled out across Northern Ireland. Queen's University Belfast has been commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the model and commenced phase one of the evaluation during the reporting period. It is intended that phase two will be undertaken (subject to funding) during 2026/27. Action completed in 2023/24 – now business as usual. Action completed in 2023/24 – now business as usual.

	Action	Progress
	improving referral pathways to services already funded by Health, Education and others (iv) Review and update the new YJA assessment tool and provide richer data on 'journey travelled' for children engaged with YJA across 5 domains - Family; Education, Training & Employment; Being Connected; Substance Misuse; Health & Wellbeing. (v) Participation - To further develop effective mechanisms to involve young people, their parents and carers, in policy and service development. (vi) Further develop approaches and partnerships to ensure more children improve their engagement with education, training or employment during their time with YJA.	The YJA has implemented five key recommendations from an external evaluation to ensure its assessment tool reflects best practice and the needs of children in the justice system. The recommendations covered the following areas: training; changes to the recording of information, a child's version of the assessment; a safety planning framework; a scoring matrix and amendments to the guidance document. This action is now complete and will be closed. In addition to the work of the task and finish group reported above, the YJA and their Participation Officer have been engaged in a range of other work to effectively involve young people and their families in issues which affect them. Some key work included: • Supporting children and young people to make changes to some YJA office spaces to make them more child friendly and trauma informed. • Expansion of the EBE (expert by experience) role by recruiting three young adult EBEs in the Belfast and Eastern area teams who supported the development of the YJA's Children's Survey, thereby ensuring it reflects the voice of young people and their families. The YJA has also retained its one parent EBE in the Belfast area. • YJA continues to be a lead partner in the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities and Communities programme in the Derry City and Strabane district and in August, the district became the second location in the UK to receive child friendly city and community status. The Youth Justice Agency continues to build links with providers and partners committed to improving the education, training and employment (ETE) needs of children and young people, both within Northern Ireland and more

	Action	Progress
	New Year 4 action: (vii) Review YJA's support for victims to ensure it is aligned with the commitment to trauma-informed practice.	widely across the UK. During 2025/26, the following was actioned: • YJA and Education Authority joint workshop was held with heads of service for Education Welfare, EOTAS (education other than at school), SEN (statement of educational needs) and the Restorative Justice/ Health and Well-Being Team. The focus of the event was to create better pathways for open communication. • YJA has established a pilot Senior Practitioner post with responsibility for ETE and neurodiversity, whose focus is to further develop approaches and partnerships to ensure more children improve their engagement with ETE. • YJA has linked in with Labour Market Partnerships in each local council area to improve access to training and employment opportunities for justice experienced children. • There has been a renewal of partnership working with the Careers Service, resulting in co-designing approaches for children and resources for YJA staff. The Agency has undertaken the following measures in order to ensure the views of victims are considered and reflected in service delivery: • YJA attends the DoJ Victim and Witness Steering Group in order to ensure consistency of approach. • YJA launched a consultation early in 2026 to hear the experiences and views of victims in service delivery and to improve alignment to trauma-informed approaches. The results of the consultation were positive and will be analysed to improve YJA service delivery. • A review of operational guidance around victim classification and recording on YJA's databases has been completed and the outcomes, including implementation of trauma-informed language, are to be embedded into practice. • Work is ongoing to support PSNI victims of crime and their involvement in the restorative process.

	Action	Progress
	New Year 4 Action: (viii) Work in partnership to improve the evidence base on the needs of girls in the justice system and implement learning in practice Lead for all actions under 2.4 – YJA	The YJA has developed practice guidance for working with young women and girls, informed by research and the views of young women themselves. In addition, the Agency commissioned new research in partnership with Queen's University Belfast and the University of Limerick entitled 'Gendered Experiences and Pathways to Justice Contact for Girls in Northern Ireland'. This research reported in November 2025 and learning from it demonstrated that YJA's practice guidance reflects the needs and supports required by girls in the youth justice system.

Outcome 3

Children will only ever be placed in custody as a last resort.

Priority activities which had originally been identified under this outcome are:

- to introduce legislative reforms on bail and remand for children during the next Assembly mandate; and
- to support the development and implementation of a Regional Care and Justice Campus in partnership with the Department of Health.

Context

Article 37 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children should only ever be held in custody as a measure of last resort and for the shortest period of time possible. In line with the decrease in children entering the formal youth justice system, a similar decrease has been witnessed in terms of the number of children held in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (the only secure justice facility in Northern Ireland). The latest published figures⁵ show that in 2024/25, the number of individual children admitted to custody over the year was 95. This represents a small decrease from the previous year (104) and a significant decrease of over 40% when compared to figures published for the same period 6 years earlier (160). The average daily population of Woodlands was 8 children in 2024/25, compared to 25 children a decade ago.

While the reduced numbers of children being held in the JJC is to be welcomed, the available statistics continue to show that only a very small percentage of children admitted to the centre are there as a result of a court sentence. In 2024/25, for example, out of the 265 movements within the centre during that period, 150 movements related to PACE, 107 to remand, and only 8 to sentences. [*The term “movements” refers to all admissions and changes of status (e.g. from PACE to remand) which take place within the JJC*]. Figures such as these give rise to questions as to whether the UNCRC principle that custody should only be used as a measure of last resort for children is being adhered to in practice.

As referenced under outcome two, the number of young people in contact with the youth justice system who are presenting with increasingly complex needs is a growing issue. This trend can also be observed amongst those held in custody. Whilst it has been some years since the last Health Needs Assessment (HNA) was conducted within the JJC (2019), the findings at that time remain relevant for today's cohort. In 2019, almost seven in ten children were engaged with the in-reach Forensic Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (FCAMHS) and the HNA also identified rates of moderate and severe learning difficulties that were substantially higher than the Northern Ireland average. Furthermore, the majority of the assessed cohort were not regularly attending mainstream education, highlighting the significant levels of vulnerability and unmet need among children in custody.

⁵ NI Youth Justice Agency Annual Workload Statistics 2024/25 - NISRA

When the Strategic Framework was published in March 2022, plans were underway to develop a Regional Care and Justice Campus Programme. Following a decision to stand down the Programme, the focus has changed instead to harmonising rather than integrating services between Woodlands JJC and Lakewood Secure Care Centre. This work has been responsible for the introduction of ACORN – a multi-disciplinary health and therapeutic care team, which is operating across both sites and includes services such as mental health nursing, psychology and occupational therapy.

Actions and Progress update

	Action	Progress
3.1	Improve arrangements for bail, remand and custody for children through amendment to primary legislation. Lead – DoJ	Provisions to amend children's bail, remand and the custodial sentencing framework were included in the Justice Bill at Introduction (17 September 2024). During this reporting period, officials have assisted the Justice Committee with queries in relation to the provisions, both in writing and through appearance at oral sessions. Committee Stage ended in March 2026 with the Committee proposing very minimal changes to the relevant provisions. The Bill is expected to be granted Royal Assent at the end of 2026. Work to amend the necessary court rules and to develop guidance for stakeholders to assist in implementing the new provisions is ongoing.
3.2	Work with partners in Health, particularly the South-Eastern HSC Trust (through a new Partnership Board), to develop harmonised services between Woodlands and Lakewood and support improved transitions for children from secure care or custody into community settings. Lead – YJA	The Partnership Board has been established and continues to meet. Shared mental health and therapeutic services are in place, and the newly appointed senior nurse is developing a more common approach to primary care across the two sites. In addition to Partnership Board meetings, there are regular discussions between senior staff in Lakewood and Woodlands both in relation to sharing services wherever possible and on support for individual children. Action completed - now business as usual
3.3	Develop further the bail fostering pilot scheme as an alternative to custody and to support successful transitions back into the community. Lead – YJA	The Bail fostering scheme has been officially established in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area, first as a pilot scheme and now mainstreamed as business as usual. There have been preliminary discussions about the potential for extending this to other HSC Trust areas in the future.

Outcome 4

Working in partnership to deliver wider, systemic change to improve the lives of children.

Priority activities under this outcome are:

- to explore the potential reform of wider systemic issues, in the best interests of children;
- to deliver agreed recommendations from the Independent Reviewer of Criminal Records;
- to deliver a streamlined youth justice legislative framework which is simpler and more easily understood; and
- to improve transitions for young people.

Context

Research⁶ consistently shows that the deeper a child becomes involved in the formal criminal justice system, the poorer their long-term outcomes are likely to be. This is why our Strategic Framework places a strong emphasis on helping children exit the justice system at the earliest possible stage, including preventing entry into custody wherever possible.

However, one way to significantly reduce children's involvement in the justice system would be to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR). At 10 years old, Northern Ireland's MACR is among the lowest in Europe and falls well below the age of 14 recommended by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Increasing the age to 12 years was a recommendation in the Youth Justice Review almost 15 years ago and considerable efforts have been made by Justice Ministers in the intervening years to attempt to secure the necessary political support needed to effect such a change, without success.

At present, there is nothing legally preventing children as young as ten years from being held in an adult custodial facility, although an administrative fix introduced by the Department in 2012 prevents this from happening in practice. Provisions in the Justice Bill, which is due to be granted Royal Assent in 2026/27, will provide for a more permanent statutory solution through the introduction of a new custodial order for children, as well as amendments to existing legislation which provide for the remand and imprisonment of children.

For those already involved in the system, a number of wider systemic issues can contribute to poorer long-term outcomes for children. These include factors such as delays in processing cases, where it can be several months between the initial investigation and the child receiving a sentence. Whilst this can also be the case for adults, the rapid developmental changes experienced by children and the potential impact on their education and opportunities for rehabilitation mean that delays can have more significant consequences for this cohort. A number of workstreams are

⁶ See, for example, McAra, L. and McVie, S. (2007) "Youth Justice? The impact of system contact on patterns of desistance from offending" – European Journal of Criminology

being taken forward by the relevant division within the Department of Justice in order to improve case processing times for both children and adults.

Upon an admission or finding of guilt, any formal contact with the criminal justice system can result in a child ending up with a criminal record and consequently potential future barriers in terms of accessing education, training, employment and travel. Whilst the creation of the Independent Reviewer role in 2016, which has responsibility for reviewing criminal record information disclosed by AccessNI on Standard or Enhanced checks, has had a positive impact on future outcomes for a number of young people, there is still more to be done. Provisions included in the Justice Bill concerning filtering arrangements for youth diversionary disposals and a review of the list of specified offences will formalise current arrangements in respect of young people.

Finally, it has long been recognised that offending and reoffending by children does not happen in isolation. Whilst the Department of Justice has a lead role to play in rehabilitating offenders and supporting them to desist from reoffending, it cannot tackle the myriad of issues which lead to offending behaviour without the support of other Departments and agencies. A new cross-Executive Reducing Offending and Reoffending Strategy is being developed in order to address the root causes of offending through the adoption of a government-wide approach and this has been included as a key outcome in Programme for Government.

Actions and Progress update

	Action	Progress
4.1	(i) Consult on increasing the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility to 14 years in Northern Ireland. (ii) Consider outcome of consultation exercise on MACR and develop new proposals in line with the priorities of the Justice Minister and NI Executive New year 4 action: (iii) Continue to promote the outcome of the public consultation on MACR with NI Executive members as well as any developments in other jurisdictions in order to keep the issue live. Lead – DoJ	This action was completed in 2022/23 and has been closed. This action was completed in 2024/25 and has been closed. Work by the Department, Minister and a range of statutory and VCS partners has kept this issue live, and a recurring issue raised during Committee Stage of the Justice Bil was the lack of action to address MACR. A number of MLA amendments proposing an increase to MACR were tabled to the Justice Bill during this reporting period. These ranged from increases to 12 years right through to 16 years, with and without exceptions for serious offences. <i>[During Consideration Stage of the Bill, which fell outside the period of this Progress Report, the amendments were not passed by the Assembly following a petition of concern.]</i>

	Action	Progress
4.2	Conduct research to determine the key obstacles to delays in progressing youth justice cases in courts, with a view to developing solutions to address the causal factors identified. Lead – DoJ	This action was completed in 2023/24 and has been closed. Work in relation to delay will be taken forward and reported on as part of the wider Speeding Up Justice Programme.
4.3	(i) Carry out a review of specified offences which may be disclosed as part of criminal records checks. (ii) Implement proposals arising from the review of the list of specified offences. Lead – DoJ	This action was completed in 2023/24 and has been closed. Provisions for changes to Part V of the Police Act in respect of proposals arising from the review of specified offences are included in the Justice Bill which is currently progressing through the NI Assembly. Committee Stage completed before the end of March 2026, with minimal change to relevant provisions. The Bill is expected to be granted Royal Assent at the end of 2026. Work in preparation for implementation of the provisions is ongoing.
4.4	Introduce primary legislation to underpin current filtering arrangements for youth diversionary disposals Lead – DoJ	Provisions for changes to Part V of the Police Act in relation to filtering arrangements for youth diversionary disposals are included in the Justice Bill which is currently progressing through the NI Assembly. Committee Stage completed before the end of March 2026 with minimal change to relevant provisions. The Bill is expected to be granted Royal Assent at the end of 2026 and will place the current administrative provisions on a legislative footing.
4.5	Develop a new Children's Justice Bill which will consolidate and simplify criminal justice legislation relating to children and modernise the delivery of youth justice in Northern Ireland. Lead – DoJ	Given the significant amount of youth justice provisions now being taken forward in the first Bill of the mandate, it has been agreed that there is no longer either the need, or space within the legislative programme, for a standalone Children's Justice Bill. Officials in DoJ will continue to work with colleagues responsible for the legislative programme to identify an opportunity to include provisions on a single community order once the development work has been completed - this will be reported on under 2.1 above. This action is therefore considered complete and was closed in 2023/24.

	Action	Progress
4.6	Develop further understanding of the factors contributing to over-representation of certain groups in the youth justice system and work with partners to develop actions to address the issues identified. Lead – YJA	Research on children from a minority ethnic background in the justice system was launched at a well-attended workshop in June 2025. YJA is implementing its actions from the research and has shared the research with the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP). The Regional Offending sub-group of the CYPSP, chaired by YJA, is now focusing on identifying ways to work in partnership to reduce the number of children in residential care in the justice system. A Task and Finish group has shared a longlist of proposals with the sub-group which set out practical steps to reduce the number of children in residential care in the justice system. These were considered at a meeting of the sub-group on 10 March 2026, and work is underway to develop a short-list of options for further discussion.
4.7	Further develop partnerships with DfC and Trusts to find additional ways to prevent homelessness amongst young people (16-18 years) who offend. Lead – YJA	YJA has contributed to the Youth Homelessness and New Foundations Action Plans and continues to play an active role in the Joint Commissioning and Supported Accommodation Steering Group. Work is focused on New Foundations, an NIHE-led project to support more care leavers (some of whom will have been involved in offending behaviour) into social housing. The YJA Chief Executive is a member of the New Foundations project board which first met in April 2026.
4.8	Working with SBNI, develop the Youth Justice Agency as a trauma-informed organisation and share good practice with Justice partners on trauma-informed and child first approaches. Lead – YJA	Internally, YJA has established both strategic and operational working groups to continue to develop and embed trauma informed approaches whilst sharing best practice with colleagues across other organisations. A new 3-year action plan has been developed with work ongoing to support L&D, the continued screening and updating of policies and workforce well-being. YJA offices are being screened to support the continued development of more trauma informed spaces for children, families and victims and physical improvements have been made across a number of offices and in the JJC. YJA staff have also participated in a cross-sector workshop facilitated by SBNI focusing on the Role of Policy and Practice in trauma informed organisations. YJA was also represented at a Peer Learning event held in January 2026. Work is ongoing in order to review trauma informed practice within YJA to take account of changing staff profile and the consolidation of some key areas of work.

	Action	Progress
4.9	New Year 4 Action: Engage with wider cross-Executive strategies and ongoing programmes of work to ensure the needs of children in the justice system are reflected and considered. Lead - DoJ	A draft short-term cross-Executive (DE, DfC, DfE, DoH, DoJ and TEO) Strategic Framework to Reduce Offending and Reoffending has been developed following a series of round table and bilateral cross-government events and will be published in the next business year. The Framework will support early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation activity across Departments. In parallel, work is underway to develop the longer-term Strategy to Reduce Offending and Reoffending. A Call for Views also issued on this. Following a Strategic Insights Lab process, facilitated by Innovation and Consultancy Services, a new cross-Executive Strategic Board, chaired by the Justice Permanent Secretary, with Deputy Secretary (Grade 3) representation from all Executive Departments provides senior oversight. The YJA has fed into these discussions in order to ensure that the needs of children in the justice system are reflected.
4.10	New Year 4 Action: The Police Service of Northern Ireland will support delivery of the key outcomes identified within the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice through provision of its Children and Young People Strategy across the following themes: Safety and Protection; Suspected Offending; Victims & Witnesses; Stop & Search.	Safety and Protection <u>Child Criminal Exploitation</u> - Guidance has been developed through the Child Exploitation Committee of the SBNI which will form the basis for future awareness raising, training, and strategy/policy development. - Engagement with the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC) - CPD event with NCLCC and the University of Ulster to take place later in 2026. - Work is ongoing to safeguard children and have them recognised as having been exploited and referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). This will allow them to avail of a statutory defence of having been forced to participate in criminality. - A devolved decision-making NRM pilot for Northern Ireland has been in operation since 1st January 2026 and will consider referrals received at the Home Office. The pilot scheme has seen positive outcomes in other UK areas, including faster, more child-focused decisions about protection and care. This mechanism is the UK's framework for identifying and supporting victims of modern slavery and the pilot has improved awareness and strengthened multi-agency working. - The CCE screening tool, which has been developed in collaboration with SBNI and Queen's University Belfast, is being piloted for testing. The CSE team are screening all children referred for assessment and all children currently on the CSE framework. - Twin Sight North is a collaboration between QUB and PSNI Public Protection Branch to develop an

	Action	Progress
		evidence-supported approach to understanding criminal and pro-social networks. - The upgrade of the PSNI Niche system is progressing to create bespoke flags (similar to the “At risk of CSE” flag) for a young person at risk of CCE, and the identification of Persons of Concern for CSE and CCE. It is expected this will go live in June 2026. Child Sexual Exploitation - CSE Guidance for investigating officers and first responders to CSE has been signed off. Continued Professional Development is being rolled out for all officers with the CSE e-learning package having been peer reviewed by the Hydrant Programme and updated. It is to be rolled out to all officers as soon as it is finalised. - The E-Learning Package in respect of Article 65 Children (NI) Order to assist first responders with applying the legislation, engagement with Social Services and safeguarding children is almost at completion stage and the Committee will be updated on its roll out in the next update paper. - Child Exploitation Awareness Day was March 18th 2026. Internal and external media pieces were used to highlight CSE, CCE and the signs to look out for. Stop & Search - During January 2025, PSNI launched its new Stop & Search information card for children and young people. These cards provide under 18s with guidance, support and additional information that they may need. - NICCY has recently been invited to attend the Service Accountability Panel (SAP) as one of the independent advisory group members. The SAP provides community-focused scrutiny regarding the use of policing powers. - An enhancement to the PSNI’s stop and search recording system (Origin) will enable it to more readily identify and display to PSNI supervisors stop and search encounters which relate to young people under 18 years old. This will be rolled out in the 2026/27 business year. Suspected Offending - A Reducing Offending in Partnership pilot protocol for supporting young people who persistently offend has been developed jointly by PSNI and YJA. Early

	Action	Progress
		indications are that this pilot is a positive undertaking and is facilitating appropriate and proportionate identification and selection of young people to participate with the aim of preventing re-offending. • Amendments to the Youth Engagement Clinic Guidance have been completed following review, to enhance efficiency and address areas that were contributing to unnecessary delay. This review has been overseen by all key stakeholders from PSNI, PPS and YJA. • In November 2025, 18 officers from Local Policing were trained in Restorative Justice and the Youth Justice System (this will provide resilience to Youth Diversion Officers and also raise awareness within Local Policing of Early Stage Diversion, Children's Diversion Forum and youth justice disposals). • A "Custody Navigators" project is in preparation to be piloted which involves PSNI and Education Authority youth workers. The pilot will be launched in summer 2026, with EA involved in procuring training for their staff to ensure safe and effective delivery of this work, which would be delivered in a custody environment. It will initially focus on 18-25 year olds in this setting. Whilst this cohort extends beyond the age remit of the SFYJ, this pilot could help support young people facing transitions within the system, particularly the move from children's to adults' services. • PSNI now audit overnight detention of children in police custody who are held for court proceedings, and any delays in a child being brought before a custody officer in a custody setting. Additional audit areas include provision of appropriate adults for children and pre-release risk assessments. • Community Resolution Notices continue to be in use and are continuously under review with a dedicated PSNI team overseeing this approach. • Work continues on the Early Diversion Scheme, which is viewed as a scheme with great potential and benefits. PSNI will also monitor the Adult Restorative Justice Scheme, which launched at the end of March 2026, with a view to exploring progress and monitoring any learning which would benefit the Early Diversion Scheme. Victims and Witnesses • Public Protection Branch has issued guidance to officers in relation to the use of appropriate

	Action	Progress
		language in potential child exploitation cases, and challenging victim-blaming language.

CONCLUSION

Good progress was achieved across a number of actions during Year 4 of the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice, supported by both lead delivery organisations and wider partner agencies. The progression of the Justice Bill through the Assembly has prompted considerable debate around youth justice issues, particularly in relation to increasing the minimum age of criminal responsibility, both amongst Justice Committee members as well as in the media. The Bill, which contains provisions around changes to children's bail, remand and custody, as well as provisions relating to the disclosure of criminal records attained by children, is expected to complete its Assembly passage in the autumn of 2026 and be granted Royal Assent at the end of the calendar year.

In year 5, a key focus for the Department, in addition to developing and publishing statutory guidance in relation to the youth justice provisions in the Justice Bill, will be the development of instructions to allow for the drafting of legislation to create a new single, flexible community order for children. Plans for implementation of the new Youth Diversion Order for terrorism-related offences will also be taken forward, as well as new measures aimed at improving the youth court experience for young people. The Youth Justice Agency will continue to deliver against its three-year corporate plan (2025-28) which was developed in partnership with key stakeholders, including statutory and third sector organisations, and children and families, as well as its new Business Plan for 2026/27. Both are aligned to the Programme for Government as well as the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice.

An updated SFYJ action plan for 2026/27 (Year 5) has been published alongside this report. As well as indicating where original actions have been completed and closed, it contains a number of new actions which will be progressed over the coming months. This plan has been agreed by the Implementation Group leading on the delivery of the Framework and has been approved by the Minister.

SFYJ Implementation Group

Terms of Reference

(Revised June 2025)

Purpose

This document sets out the terms of reference for the group established to take forward the implementation of the actions set out in the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice 2022-2027.

Background

In March 2022, the Department of Justice published a new Strategic Framework for Youth Justice (SFYJ), alongside a number of accompanying documents including a five-year Action Plan. The Framework was developed in partnership with the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) and was informed by the views of a range of key stakeholders, including statutory justice organisations; voluntary, community and third sector organisations; and children and families with lived experience of the care and justice systems.

The SFYJ aims to deliver against four high-level outcomes in order to realise the Department's vision of *"a progressive youth justice system – delivering better outcomes for children and communities."* These outcomes are attached at **Appendix A** for reference.

Key to this work will be the continued delivery of, and investment in, initiatives aimed at diverting young people from the youth justice system at the earliest possible stage, and the development of further measures aimed at ensuring custody for children is a last resort. The published Action Plan contained a total of 16 actions which, when implemented, will contribute towards the achievement of the high-level outcomes. The Action Plan is a living document which will be reviewed annually, with actions added or amended during the five-year lifespan of the Strategic Framework to reflect their implementation status as well as changing priorities and circumstances.

Roles and responsibilities

The Implementation Group will establish a coherent and co-ordinated approach to the work required to deliver on the actions and outcomes in the SFYJ.

In doing so, members will have a role in:

- delivering agreed priorities within realistic timescales, taking resources and other issues into account;
- leading on, or assisting with, the implementation of identified actions through, for example, Task and Finish groups;
- ensuring that the principles set out in the SFYJ, particularly around incorporating the views and experiences of children and young people in the work, are adhered to in the delivery of the actions and their outcomes;
- sharing information and best practice from Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions to inform the work as it develops;
- providing relevant data and evidence to measure the success, or otherwise, of the SFYJ implementation, including the creation of datasets where none currently exist; and
- providing an ongoing review and reporting mechanism for the actions contained in the SFYJ Action Plan.

In addition, members representing the children's sector organisations will be responsible for providing assistance and advice to the Implementation Group, particularly in respect of the Group's engagement with children and young people in relation to implementation of the Action Plan. They will also provide linkages between the work of the Group and the wider children's sector.

Frequency of Meetings

The first meeting will take place in July 2022. Thereafter, it is anticipated that the Group will meet three times per year, or more frequently if required, to be kept under review.

Task and Finish groups or workstream subgroups will be established as required and will report directly to the main Implementation Group.

Reporting

Reducing Offending Directorate (ROD) will provide the Secretariat function for the Group, including the drafting of minutes and circulation of relevant papers. Members are responsible for reporting progress to their own organisation's senior management teams, as required.

It is acknowledged that the members of the group from children's sector organisations are representing the wider children's sector. As such, it is expected that there will be a two-way exchange of information in relation to the work of the Implementation Group in order to ensure the views of the wider children's sector are taken into account.

All members will contribute to the production of an annual report on progress made against the Action Plan. This report will be coordinated by ROD, and will be published on the Departmental website in the interests of communication and transparency.

Membership

The Group will be chaired by the A/Director of Reducing Offending.

The membership of the group is comprised of:

Chief Executive, Youth Justice Agency

Director/Assistant Director, Youth Justice Services YJA

Director/Assistant Director, Custodial Services YJA

Deputy Director, Reducing Offending Division

Justice Performance Division, DoJ

AccessNI, DoJ

Director of Family and Children's Policy, Department of Health

Criminal Justice Directorate, PSNI

Office of the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People

Include Youth

Children's Law Centre

VOYPIC

Secretariat provided by Reducing Offending Directorate, DoJ

Other representatives, including those from other statutory justice bodies, will be invited to attend Task and Finish / subgroup meetings and the main Implementation Group, as required.

[Agreed] July 2022

[revised June 2025]

Appendix A

Strategic Framework for Youth Justice: Outcomes

Outcome 1: Children are exited from the criminal justice system at the earliest point, with appropriate support.

Outcome 2: Positive outcomes for children, families, victims and communities affected by offending.

Outcome 3: Children will only ever be placed in custody as a last resort.

Outcome 4: Working in partnership to deliver wider, systemic change to improve the lives of children.