



Youth Justice
Agency



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BELFAST**

Evaluation of the Youth Justice Agency of Northern Ireland's Children's Diversion Forums (CDFs)

An Outcome Harvest

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Foreword

Priority outcome 1 of the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice 2022-27, published by the Justice Minister in March 2022, is about exiting children from the criminal justice system at the earliest point with appropriate support. This means reducing the number of children in the formal justice system (i.e. reaching court or entering custody) by putting a greater emphasis on earlier stage diversion (ESD). ESD approaches involve working with partners to identify children involved in the early stages of offending and providing those children with appropriate services to prevent them re-offending and entering the formal justice system. Children's Diversion Forums (CDFs) are an important aspect of this approach, particularly for children with additional support needs.

The Youth Justice Agency (YJA) commissioned an evaluation of CDFs to ensure that they are meeting their stated objectives – i.e. they are identifying the right children (without net-widening), sharing information across partner agencies appropriately, assessing need and linking children and their families to appropriate services. It's really positive to see that this evaluation report reaches the conclusion that CDFs are meeting their stated objectives – and more. Importantly, the evaluation report also identifies key learning and makes a number of recommendations. YJA will be working with partners to address these recommendations and further develop CDFs using the learning in this report.

Evaluating CDFs was not an easy task and we're really grateful for the skill and hard work of Dr Colm Walsh from Queens University Belfast in developing an appropriate methodology to evaluate CDFs and delivering such a high quality evaluation report. We're also grateful to our staff and partners who were involved in a whole myriad of ways in this process.

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Introduction

Youth crime is a perennial challenge and one that vacillates both in terms of meaning and response (McAra, 2008). The corpus of evidence now illustrates that the most persistent and most harmful crimes are nested within crime inducing contexts (Van der Put, 2010), where individual-level factors (e.g., substance use and low empathy (O'Neill et al., 2017), family-level factors (e.g., maltreatment and abuse (Farrington et al., 2009; Widom, 1989), and community level factors (e.g., exposure to community violence (Fowler et al., 2009)), interact to elevate the risk of offending among young people.

In regard to responses, much of Europe has invested in more of a welfare-based approach ensuring that for most youth who are criminalised, they remain separated from adults systems and whose needs are assessed with the aim of reducing further offending (Burnett and Appleton, 2004). A welfare-based approach further demands that the principle of 'best interest' is at the centre of decision making and implementation (Robertson, 2017). Reform of youth justice in the UK, while slower than European counterparts, have increasingly oriented youth justice policy and practice towards the prevention of crime, not least to avoid what McAra and McVie (2010) refer to as the revolving door of offending. One of these developments has been a move towards more integrated youth justice delivery in recognition of the cross-cutting antecedents and impact of youth crime (Rehill and Miller, 2024). Indeed, in their review of constructs associated with youth offending, Ullman et al (2024) found how evidence reinforced the importance of understanding the needs of children; the interplay of individual, family, school, community factors; and the need to prioritise pre-court diversion from the formal justice system.

Child First

Child First is an approach to youth justice that emerged in the UK context as a counter to the Risk-Need-Responsivity paradigm that, for the most part, informed and dominated youth justice theory and practice for decades (Ullman et al., 2024). The paradigm has its origins in Wales, and was first articulated by Haines and Drakeford (1998) who were particularly concerned around the criminalisation of children and perceived breaches of international Conventions such as the UNCRC. Central to the approach is moving away from punishing behaviour and understanding the needs, contexts, and relationships that induce behaviour that is often criminalised (Case and Browning, 2021). From a Child First perspective, responses should not be purely retrospective (addressing events/actions that have already occurred), but prospective (looking forward in time to understand the factors that could promote better outcomes for children) (Case and Haines, 2014). Within a decade the principles became embedded into Welsh youth justice.

Since 2017, the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales has sought to extend this further highlighting that Child First is the central guiding principle (YJB, 2021) of a new and more positive youth justice model of practice (Haines and Case, 2015). Of particular importance in the context of this study is the focus on diversion.

Pre-court, Earlier Stage Diversion (ESD).

The corpus of evidence confirms that few children offend. Latest figures from NI illustrate that 774 individuals were referred into the youth justice system (Brown, 2023). This accounts for less than 1% of the total youth population aged between 10 and 17 (0.4%) (Brown, 2023; Clark, 2024)¹ Even among those who offend, most children entering the criminal justice system exit it again relatively quickly. However, some come into the system with complex needs and will need additional support to promote lawfulness and wellbeing. ESDs aim to provide bespoke services/supports to individual children at an early stage of their offending to help them to avoid offending and reduce the number of children entering the court system (YJA, 2023). In line with the best practice and international standards, and regional policies such as the Department of Justice (DOJ) Strategic Framework for Youth Justice in NI (DOJ, 2022), the YJA is committed to continuing to develop and grow ESD. Indeed, one of YJA's key business priorities is that, *"Children are exited from the youth justice system at the earliest opportunity, with appropriate support"*. Currently about 17% of YJA cases are ESD². Over recent years, ESD has objectively contributed to a reduction in the number of children going to court or custody (see YJA workload statistics for reference). YJA only works directly with children who are already involved in offending behaviour, and Earlier Stage Diversion (ESD) targets those who may need additional support to prevent re-offending. The portfolio of ESD is growing and the approaches continue to evolve. These include direct ESD referrals, ESD funding for the facilitation of targeted, promotive work, the Community Resolution Notice Referral Scheme, and the Sexting Referral Scheme. YJA involvement is on a voluntary basis, so the informed consent of children and their parents/carers is critical. The duration, intensity and content of intervention is guided by an assessment of need, and the wishes of the child and his/her parents/carers. Normally support does not exceed 3 months.

It is widely accepted that the primary prevention of offending is best located outside the criminal justice system; being delivered through good quality universal services, augmented by targeted additional support for individuals and communities with the greatest level of need.

The direct role of the youth justice system and YJA should be 'Earlier Stage Diversion' (i.e., providing support to children involved in the early stages of the criminal justice system to prevent reoffending and divert them from more formal, longer-term involvement).

1 The number of children aged 10-17 in Northern Ireland on 30th June 2022 was 201,115 (NISRA, 2023)

2 Based on 2022/23 YJA data

The strategic aim of ESD is to contribute to the reduction in the number of children entering custody or the formal court system. A key way of achieving this is by working in partnership with other key partners to “dampen down” the system and to rebalance service towards earlier stage diversion. In effect, this often means YJA working with a similar cohort of children as before, but intervening less intrusively with many of them. In undertaking this role YJA is mindful of the risks of net-widening and “over-dosing”.

This strategy is similar to that adopted by the Youth Justice Board, and YJA practice is similar to that delivered in Youth Offending Services across England and Wales. YJA ESD is also informed by the YJA Model of Practice, which is underpinned by Children First Principles which have also been adopted by the YJB in England and Wales.

YJA is currently best placed to deliver earlier stage diversion as it is embedded in a wide range of initiatives and partnerships which allows it to identify children involved in the early stages of offending who may need additional support to avoid reoffending. This includes Youth Engagement Clinics, Children’s Diversion Forums, ASB Forums, PCSPs, CYPSP Locality Groups and CRNs. The agency is also best placed to deliver direct services to these children and families, or to link them with appropriate other services, as it is a regional service with qualified and skilled social work and youth work staff. This means that YJA can deliver a similar high standard of direct service to children and families no matter where they live in Northern Ireland and/or link them to appropriate other universal, targeted or specialist services delivered by the statutory, voluntary or community sectors.

This notion of earlier stage intervention has implications. It requires that agencies make sense of criminogenic contexts and the needs of individuals in order to interrupt offending trajectories. That is, putting in place evidence informed supports and services in order to mitigate the risk of later offending. For example, in the Scottish context, the Preventing Offending Framework (Scottish Government, 2008) laid down in policy a commitment to understanding the array of factors contributing to youth offending, marking a strategic shift in language and focus. This too has implications. To fully understand the needs of individual’s, agencies cannot successfully do this in silos and thus the thrust of emphasis has increasingly been aimed towards reducing silos and enhancing effective partnership working where problems traditionally dealt with by specialist agencies pool their knowledge, skills and insights for dealing more effectively with cross-cutting issues (Burnett and Appleton, 2004). Finally, the move implies a new way of thinking about crime and the multi-faceted causes of crime (McAra and McVie, 2016; Souhami, 2019). If implemented effectively, it means that there is a requirement to understand the needs that contribute to offending behaviour in order to intervene at the earliest possible stage.

Given that not all responses are equal—indeed some could elevate risk—there is also a need to match need with the support best likely to reduce risk. This is not always possible (Souhami, 2019). In the Scottish context, statutory agencies are mandated to work together in order to streamline practices and improve joined up delivery (Scottish Government, 2012). This new *'ideology of unity'* (Crawford, 1994) has many guises and is not within its challenges (Liddle and Gelsthorpe, 1994; Hood, 2014).

Multi-agency working

Multi-agency working has multiple meanings across different spaces (Hood, 2014), however, one definition proposed by Crawford (1998:119) is simply that it is the *'coming together of various agencies to address a problem'* akin to Leathard's (2003:5) rebuttal perceived against terminological difficulties (Lloyd et al., 2001), where she said somewhat frustratingly that *'what everyone is really talking about is simply learning and working together'*. While it has utility, these sorts of definition are likely to be over-simplified and obscure the implementation challenges. A competing and more nuanced definition proposed by Frost (2005) describes multi-agency partnerships as existing on a spectrum, ranging from cooperation (where agencies retain independence), to collaboration (where agencies exist as equal members and engage in joint decision making), thus at least hinting at the variation in design and complexities related to its operationalisation.

Over the last two decades, multi-agency working has become increasingly embedded into youth justice practice, not least because of the priority such approaches have become in policy (Souhami, 2019). In England and Wales, the Youth Offending Services have their statutory footing in the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), and were established to reduce and prevent offending among children 10-18. The services themselves are multi-agency, consisting of social workers, probation officers, police, case managers, substance-use practitioners and allied health workers (Perumall, 2017). Indeed, the multi-agency element has become further embedded into the approach through the Children Act (2004) which demands that Youth Offending Teams not only prevent crime, but also that they do so within the context of a multi-agency framework. The purpose of the multiple agencies is to understand risk from multiple perspectives, but also to leverage the skills and resources across sectors (Wong et al., 2012).

A multi-year inspection across YOTs in England and Wales found several exemplary cases where the multi-agency elements actively preventing crime and also facilitated the process of desistance. In Luton's Amber Unit for example, a team of police officers, youth workers and youth justice workers were collocated. The inspectorate found that this model enabled the identification of youth at risk of serious offending and importantly, more effective responses through coherent data sharing and enhanced coordination (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). In Leicester too, the coordination between a services contributed to reducing school exclusions, responding to trauma and addressing addiction. Combined, these efforts were demonstrably related to reduced offending.

These observations from the Inspectorate are not isolated. Indeed, the benefits, where they are realised, are much more global and range from enhanced efficiency through resource management (Burnett, 2005); more effective practice through better decision making (Taylor, 2016); more consistent delivery through bringing diverse agencies together for a common approach (Roets et al., 2016).

As part of the development of Whole System Approaches (WSA) in Scotland, various processes as well as tools have emerged intended to facilitate better multi-agency working. For instance, the multi-agency child plan (Scottish Government, 2012) is intended to be an information sharing tool developed across agencies and involving the child and their family/carers. Where partnership ‘works’, the success has been lauded (CJJI, 2013). However, it is also the case that there has thus far been a paucity of evaluations that explore the effectiveness of partnership working within the youth justice context and of the limited sources available, several point to the inherent difficulties with consistent implementation and failure to fully responded to the multi-faceted needs of vulnerable youth (Hood, 2014; Gray, 2016; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). Part of the challenge has been with regard to information sharing.

A related structure is the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs that have emerged as a single point of contact for children for whom safeguarding concerns exists. These Hubs aims to enhance information sharing across agencies and respond in a more timely way to issues of concern (Home Office, 2014). A challenge, however, is that often, both the YOS and MASH’s are dealing with the same individual’s (Perumall, 2017).

Maybe one of the most consistently described approaches to multi-agency working, particularly with regard to children with complex needs, is the ‘*no wrong door*’ approach.

No wrong door

The concept of ‘*no wrong door*’ has been applied in various guises and across multiple geographical spaces ranging from the Americas (New York State Association of Counties, 2012) through to Australasia (Government of Australia, 2019); Europe, and specifically, the UK (Pollard and Bell, 2022) and Ireland (DoJ, 2021). Indeed, in the Republic of Ireland, the concept is embedded within the Youth Justice Strategy (DoJ, 2021). In her review of NWD literature, Reidy (2022) explored 73 academic articles and evaluation reports, concluding that there was no single form of implementation, however, five core themes emerged, two of which is most relevant to this study:

1. Single entry point where an individual can access one pathway but potentially receive screening/assessment/consideration/referral for a number of supports and/or services (Bell and Pollard, 2019)
2. One story where the risk of an individual’s having to disclose the same (and potentially traumatic) story over and over to multiple services at each point of referral is mitigated against by sharing of information between agencies (Isle of Wight NHS Trust, 2020) or by applying what has been coined as a ‘human centered’ approach (Duggan, 2013) to work with individuals who have complex needs. In essence, this means responding to observable symptoms of trauma rather than reacting to difficult and challenging presentations (Reidy, 2022).

In this Irish context, the concept, while still being defined, refers to the idea that an individual gets access to the right support and the right time regardless of which service or support they happen to engage with. For instance, if someone with acute housing needs becomes known to police or the health system or the social care system, they would get access to the same supports because-importantly-there is a mechanism that enables more effective decision making to take place in a joined-up and coherent way.

In the North American context, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has invested in structures that enhance and facilitate joined up working between partners from various sectors. In one such structure, the Network for Overcoming Violence and Abuse (NOVA), partners collaborate to understand the needs of children aged under 18 and identify the range of systemic factors contributing to offending behaviour/s (Jensen and Swaner, 2015). These range from factors such as poor housing, dysfunctional family relations, substance use and mental health (Reidy, 2022). A process evaluation undertaken by Jensen and Swaner (2015) identified key facilitators (e.g., trusting relationships between partners) as well as inhibitors (e.g., collaborative fatigue - particularly when the same organisations/people attended other structures). Interestingly, another example from the North American context included novel methods to enhance partner collaboration. In Washington State, the NWD project embedded joined up training between agencies, shared information platforms and shared funding that partners had access to as a way of encouraging engagement and retention (Webster et al., 2001).

In the UK context, NWD has been applied in various settings, including within children's residential social care (Nicholson, 2016; Lushey et al., 2017), children's mental health services (Grant et al., 2018; Lombard, 2018) and young people with complex needs, including offending behaviours (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). In one of the most celebrated forums, the Gwent SPACE-Wellbeing panel receive referrals from multiple sources to support children with a history of trauma, family functioning issues, mental health challenges and disabilities, which singly, or in multiples, have led to concerns around their behaviour. Via this forum, children with complex needs' strengths and needs are considered by the panel which meet on a weekly basis, consider the referrals, agree a plan, and then review that plan to ensure the goals have been attained and risk has not increased (Reidy, 2022). This case, while lauded by the Welsh Children's Commissioner is a good example of the practical realities of such structures. While they can be highly effective, they also rely heavily on active engagement, information sharing, and resources being available which to refer children into. In the absence of any of these, their effectiveness is muted. Interestingly, a report published by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2022) also highlighted that part of the effectiveness lay in local adaptations to the structure. So while each may have been implemented in a slightly different way, each had encouraging examples of more effective ways of working in complex spaces (Reidy, 2022). This mirrors lessons from international sites that found that partnerships are critical-indeed pivotal and that there is a fundamental need for flexibility when implementing NWD type structures (Osborne et al., 2014) (see fig. 1).

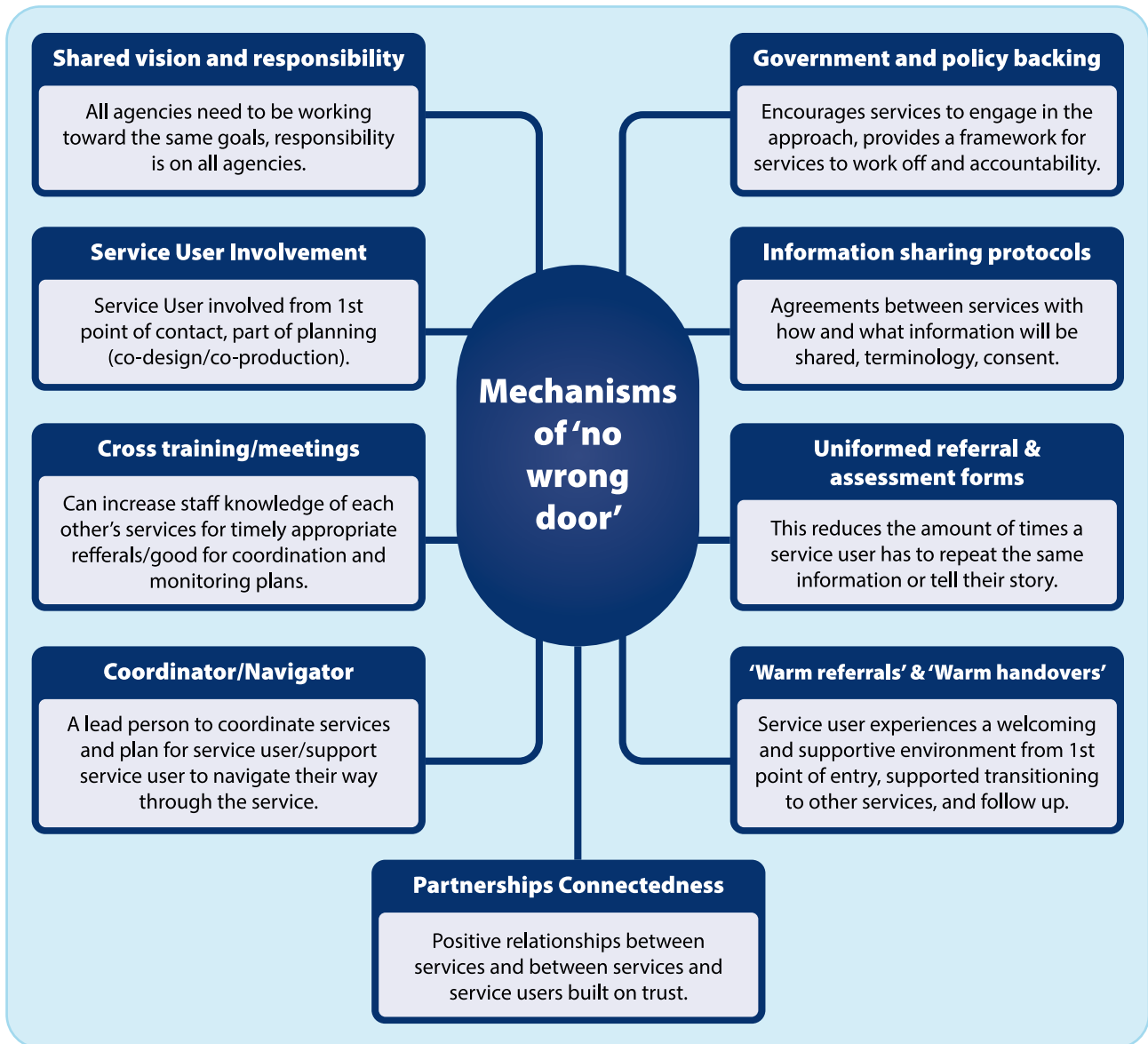


Figure 1: Mechanisms of NWD (Reidy, 2022)

Combined, the evidence suggests a need for enhanced and often specialist services for some children and young people presenting with difficult, even acute need. With ideas borrowed from NWD, the aim is for seamless journeys through support and continuity of care (Reidy, 2022). While this is the ultimate goal, several intermediate goals are required, not least it requires effective partnership working. The literature all points to the power of relationships, shared decision making, and pooling of resources so that those in need are responded to in an evidence informed way.

Developments in Northern Irish Youth Justice

With roots in the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, removing children from the formal justice system at the earliest possible stage has been the fulcrum around which youth justice policy and practice has been implemented over the last decade. Embedded within the Review of Youth Justice (YJA, 2011) and retained in the most recent Framework for Youth Justice (DoJ, 2022), earlier, pre-court intervention has been central. Indeed, the YJA exists to divert young people from crime (Brown, 2023) and the figures imply that this emphasis is having some effect, with a 54% reduction in first time entrants between 2011 and 2020 (DoJ, 2022). Although it is widely recognised that the events surrounding covid had a direct effect on crime as well as responses to crime, the most recent workload statistics illustrate a reduction of 5.2% of referrals in 2022/23 compared to the previous year. Diversionary referrals also account for the largest proportion of all referrals to the Agency (47.6%, n=648) (Brown, 2023).

However, there has long been a recognition that responding to youth crime cannot be a lonely venture. The causes of youth crime are complex and often multi-faceted, but so too is the impact. Illustrating this recognition, an end-to-end scoping study was undertaken in 2016, bringing together stakeholders from several sectors. The outcome from this was a paper entitled, *'Transitioning Youth Justice'* which became the basis for a Strategic Framework that would be published in 2022.

With an existing statutory obligation to cooperate contained to within the Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, and obligations respond to the needs of justice involved children contained within the Strategy for Children and Young People (DE, 2016), the new Strategic Framework for Youth Justice places significant emphasis on understanding the needs of children who come into contact with the justice system through coordinated and collaborative efforts with other agencies. This commitment to multi-agency working is coherently outlined in the Strategic Framework Outcome 4: *working in partnership to deliver wider, systemic change to improve the lives of children* (DoJ, 2022:14).

Community Resolution Notice Referral Scheme

A Community Resolution Notice (CRN) is an alternative way of dealing with less serious crimes, allowing PSNI officers to use their professional judgement when dealing with offences such as low level Public Disorder, Criminal Damage, Theft, minor Assaults and minor Drug Related Offences. CRNs allow victims a quick resolution to the harm caused to them; whilst giving those who commit the offence support to avoid further offending and the opportunity to repair the harm caused by their behaviour, without attracting a criminal record.

The Youth Justice Agency (YJA) commenced a scheme at the beginning of March 2018 whereby drug and alcohol awareness sessions were delivered by YJA staff to children and their parents, as part of a CRN, where the police officer administering the CRN, having consulted a Youth Diversion Officer, deemed this appropriate to help prevent further offending.

A review in November 2018 found that the scheme had been a great success; with children, parents, carers, police officers and YJA staff predominantly providing very positive feedback. Therefore, it was agreed to pilot the extension of the referral scheme for other types of offences in the YJA Belfast and Southern areas from February 2019. The extended pilot was reviewed in July 2019 and following equally positive feedback for all types of offences, PSNI and YJA agreed to roll this scheme out across Northern Ireland for all types of offences from November 2019.

Sexting Referral Scheme

The Sexting Referral Scheme is a partnership initiative between the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Youth Justice Agency (YJA). Referrals are made by PSNI for children who have been involved in relatively minor “sexting” type offence behaviour, and who would benefit from education rather than a formal justice disposal. YJA Staff provide one-off sessions for children and their parents/carers about the risks associated with this type of behaviour which are undertaken within 30 days of referral. If deemed necessary, children can also be offered further YJA involvement on a voluntary basis.

A Sexting Referral Scheme pilot began on 5th November 2019 in the PSNI A District/YJA Belfast Area and PSNI D&E Districts/YJA Southern Area. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, and the associated social isolation measures, it was thought likely that the risk of “sexting” type offending behaviour would increase so, therefore, PSNI and YJA agreed to roll out this scheme to all areas from the beginning of June 2020 in order to help deal with this.

The vast majority of children and parent/carers who have provided feedback to date have rated their experience of this scheme as very good, and have felt that it will help avoid similar behaviour in the future. The general view of YJA staff is that this is a very effective way of dealing with this issue, which also helps to keep children out of the more formal justice system.

Children’s Diversion Forums (CDFs)

In the United Kingdom, Prevent & Deter was established as one strand of Reducing Offending in Partnership (ROP), with the aim of reducing low level offending and anti-social behaviour by children through early identification and effective intervention strategies. Following a review of the ROP terms of reference, the decision was taken to remove Prevent & Deter from ROP but, nonetheless, the consensus was that there was still a need for a multi-agency forum for children who are on the cusp of entering the formal justice system. In June 2019, PSNI and YJA agreed to re-structure Prevent & Deter Forums to understand and respond to the needs of young people in the NI context.

Children’s Diversions For (CDFs) are the novel structure that emerged. They are led by the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) in Northern Ireland and attended by other statutory agencies (e.g., PSNI, EANI, HSC) in order to coordinate an earlier stage response for identifying children and young people at risk of offending and/or engaged in anti-social behaviour.

The overall aim of CDFs is to contribute to the reduction in first time entrants to the formal criminal justice system and to divert children from the formal youth justice system. They sit within the wider youth justice system process (see fig. 2) and are intended to complement the range of approaches intended to divert children from the youth justice system at the earliest possible stage. However, unlike some of the other structures, support via the CDF is voluntary, requires parental consent, and does not result in a criminal record.

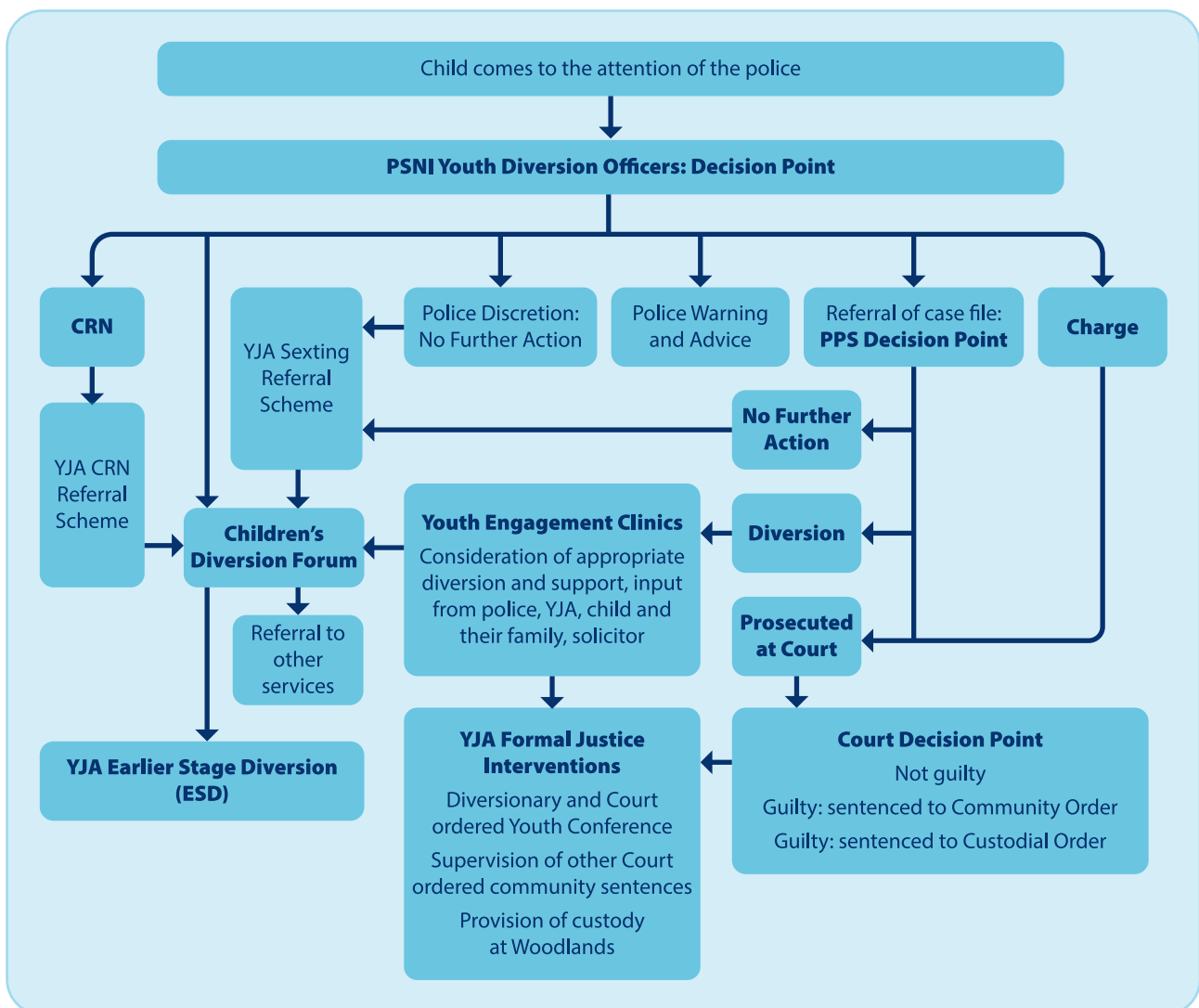


Figure 2: Youth Justice Pathways (adapted from Strategic Framework for YJ, 2022)

Panels are chaired and administered by YJA, and also include representatives from PSNI (normally YDOs), Social Services (normally Gateway Team staff) and Education Authority (normally Educational Welfare Service staff). All the partner organisations can make referrals. Partner organisations can take appropriate referrals from the panel, or provide the conduit between the children and his/her family and other services provided by the statutory, voluntary and/or community sectors.

Referral criteria include:

- Children who are involved in low level offending and/or anti-social behaviour who may need support to avoid further offending/ASB.
- Children who have completed a YJA CRN or Sexting Referral and may need additional support to avoid reoffending.
- Children subject to an Informed Warning or Restorative Caution who may need additional support to avoid re-offending.
- Should not include children already involved in, or about to be involved in, the later stages of the formal youth justice system e.g. Diversionary Youth Conferences and/or court orders.

The Children's Diversion Forum pilot started in the YJA Belfast, Southern and Western (Foyle) areas at the beginning of February 2020, and were subsequently scaled up to all areas across NI in December 2020.

Following the pilot in the YJA Belfast, Southern and Western (Foyle) Areas, a *'light-touch'* review completed in January 2021 recommended that the CDFs should be brought to scale across NI. There are currently 15 CDFs across NI. Despite these evidence informed changes, there remains a paucity of robust evidence underpinning the CDFs and their implementation in NI. Their purpose is to contribute to the reduction in first-time entrants to the formal criminal justice system, and the number of children subject to court orders by sharing information with partner organisations and assessing if additional supports are required to promote desistance from offending (DoJ, 2022).

In 2023, the YJA tendered for the implementation of an independent evaluation of the CDFs in order to establish if they were achieving their aim and objectives. QUB successfully tendered for the delivery of this evaluation.

Aim of the current study

Despite a general shift in youth justice practice towards more welfare, right-based and integrated approaches, the evidence-base remains under-developed, with a paucity of high-quality and reliable designs being implemented (Rehill and Miller, 2024).

This evaluation of CDFs was funded by the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) for Northern Ireland. The initial tender requested that the researcher should undertake a literature review, analyse routinely collected data by YJA and interview CDF partners in order to establish if CDFs were achieving the following outcomes:

- Contributing to a reduction in the number of first-time entrants (FTEs) into the formal criminal justice system;
- Contributing to a reduction in the number of children subject to court proceedings;
- Effectiveness in the multiagency identification of children involved in the early stages of offending (who had yet entered the formal criminal justice system);
- Ability to share information across CDF partners;
- Ability to assess the needs of children and their families;
- Ability to link children to the appropriate services to meet their accessed needs.

Undertaking a robust evaluation of the CDFs also meets policy obligations contained in the Strategic Framework for Youth Justice (DoJ, 2022: 56) which committed to:

Evaluate the rollout of Children's Diversion Forums as a regional service.

Queen's University Belfast successfully tendered for the evaluation, and the project was led by Dr Colm Walsh. The remainder of the paper presents the method that was employed, the key findings and recommendations.

Methodology

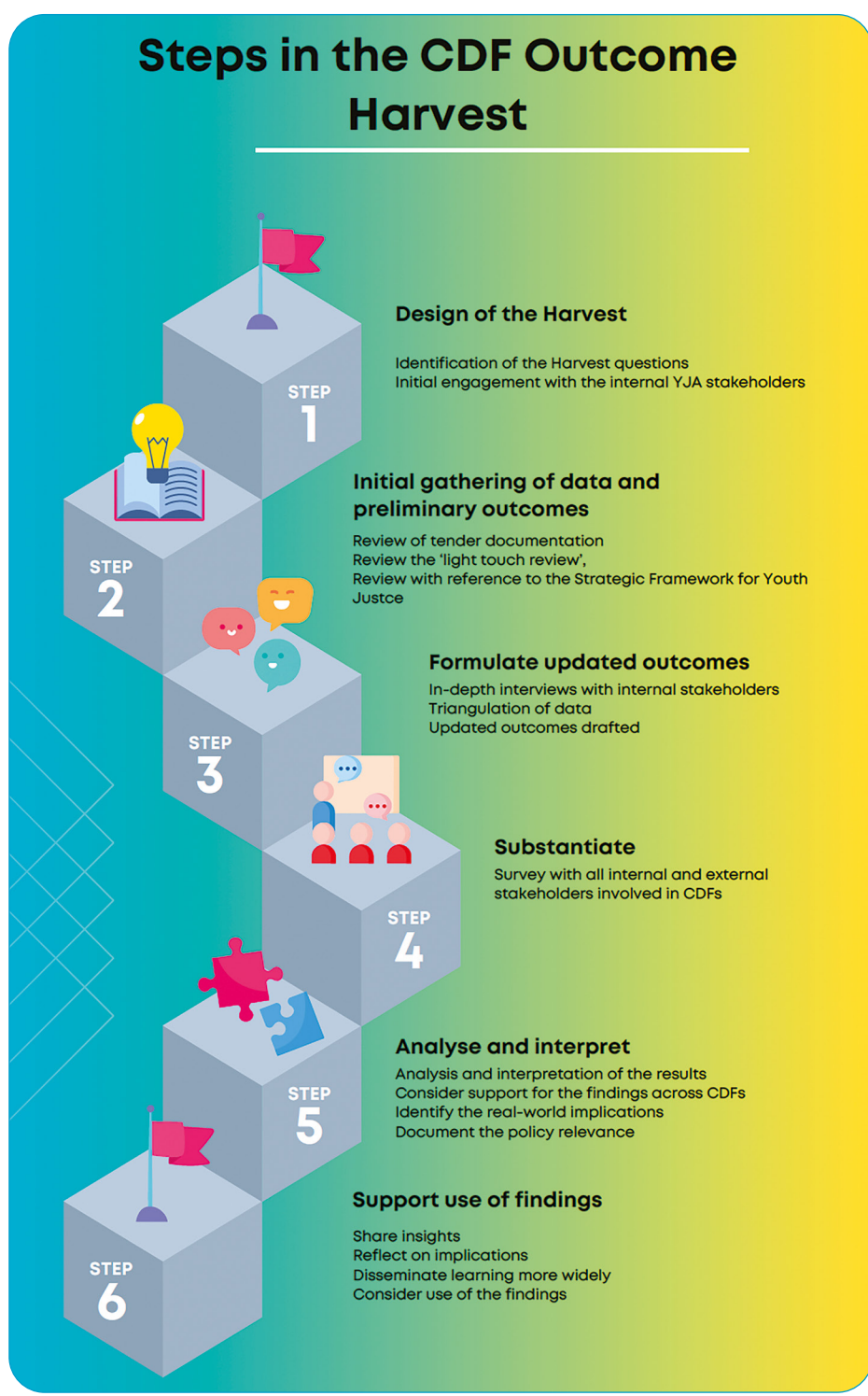


Figure 3: Steps in the OH process

Undertaking evaluation of youth justice interventions, like other complex interventions, can be challenging—indeed problematic given the multiple stakeholders that are often involved and the high degree of complexity (Beardmore, Jones and Seal, 2023). To address this challenge, a novel and underused approach to service evaluation was employed called Outcome Harvesting (The World Bank, 2014). Outcome Harvesting (OH) was developed by Wilson-Grau and Britt (2012) as a way of formulating, verifying, and making sense of outcomes, and is set apart from other methods by virtue of the fact that the process is operationalised backwards. That is, unlike outcome mapping, OH does not measure progress towards pre-determined objectives or outcomes, but rather collects evidence of what has changed and then works backwards to determine whether and how an intervention contributed to the changes observed (UNDP, 2024).

OH is an approach to evaluation that has demonstrated utility in assessing effectiveness in situations where the interventions/models are complex, in situations where those models are relatively small, and where the data has already been collected, thus requiring retrospective analyses. Importantly, the methodology prioritise collaboration between the researcher and the subjects of the research (Beardmore, Jones and Seal, 2023). It is also a robust approach in cases where, despite an absence of a rigorous theory of change, a clear logic exists (McLaughlin and Jordan, 2004). Further, traditional evaluation methodologies that rely on a Theory of Change run the risk of ignoring the contextual factors that necessitate interventions/models in the first place (Barr, 2005). As more participatory approaches to evaluation have emerged, OH is a method that prioritises collaboration between researcher and commissioner, and provides spaces for mutual understanding to emerge (Abboud and Claussen, 2016). This is even more important when the issues being explored are sensitive and even contentious.

The purpose of Outcome Harvesting is thus to identify the range of potential outcomes and the extent to which external and internal factors influence those outcomes (Beardmore et al., 2023) in a collaborative way with the commissioners of the study (Abboud and Claussen, 2016). An Outcome Harvesting evaluation consists of a number of discrete phases that are implemented in a cyclical order (see fig. 3).

In the context of the CDF evaluation, the six steps were implemented in order to firstly generate an initial outcome story and then formulate an updated and more validated outcome story supported by CDF documentation, the experiences of CDF participants, relevant policy frameworks, and CDF minutes (see table 1).

One of the benefits of OH as method, is that the reformulation of the outcomes is actually central to the process and is and of itself, a key finding of OH evaluation methodologies. For that reason, the findings that follow outline the updated outcomes that emerged following the 'updated outcomes story'.

Table 1: OH steps

Six cyclical steps of an Outcome Harvest		
1. Design of the Outcome Harvest	During this stage the key questions that the Harvest is trying to answer are agreed between the evaluator and the team. Agreement is also reached on how questions would be answered and by whom	Initial outcome story
2. Review of documentation	The potential outcome statements are identified	
3. Engagement with informants (stakeholders)	The researcher engages with internal stakeholders who are best placed to explain how outcomes have been achieved and who has contributed to those	
4. Substantiation	The researcher substantiates claims by speaking with external stakeholders	Validated outcome story
5. Analysis and interpretation	Outcome statements are organised and the evidence is gathered to answer the initial evaluation questions	
6. Support use of findings	The researcher in collaboration with the commissioner identify points for further discussion and make recommendations for the future	

In line with the Outcome Harvesting methodology, an evaluation plan was developed (See table 2) for each of the six OH phases.

Table 2: CDF OH overview

OH stage	Description	Type of data
One/two	Initial project design	Structured conversations
One/two	Design of the Outcome Harvest	Interviews/structured conversations
One/two	Review of documentation	Minutes
Three	Engagement with internal informants (stakeholders)	Interviews
Four	Substantiation	Online survey with members from across all CDFs
Five	Analysis and interpretation	Minutes were coded into SPSS (quan) Interview data were coded into Nvivo and thematically grouped (qual) Survey responses were coded into SPSS Data insights will be combined for an overall analysis and interpretation of the CDFs Insights will be 'sense-checked' with internal and external stakeholders
Six	Support use of findings	The researcher in collaboration with the agency identify points for further discussion and make recommendations for the future

The Harvest methodology was guided by four key research questions:

- 1. What are the observable outcomes that have resulted from the CDFs?**
- 2. In which ways did CDF add value to the prevention youth crime processes/practices?**
- 3. What were the intended and unintended consequences of the CDFs?**
- 4. What are the facilitators/impediments to CDFs?**

Findings

The study set out to harvest a set of outcomes that are indicative of the main types of changes CDFs have influenced. As a result of the OH approach, a total of four primary outcomes were Harvested. Table 5 illustrates these as well as illustrating convergence and divergence from the original tender specification.

Initial outcome story

Following a review of documentation and early interviews with YJA stakeholders, the initial outcome story consisted of three key areas. Firstly, the focus was on the impact that CDFs had on children who offend who were perceived to be at elevated risk of offending. The structure was a means to an end, and the perception at that time was that the primary outcomes were concerned with reducing the numbers of children subject to court proceedings; a reduction in the numbers of first time entrants coming into the justice system; and better multi-agency working. These three outcomes were relatively well-defined and in particular the first two areas (i.e., reductions) were easily measured using routinely collected agency data as well as administrative data from NI Courts.



**Effective
Multi-agency
working**



**Reduction in
FTEs to the
Youth Justice
System**



**Reduction in
children subject
to court
proceedings**

Following discussions between the author and YJA staff, it was agreed that CDFs do not in themselves directly impact on reducing FTEs or children subject to court orders, as their key function is to identify appropriate children (i.e. those involved in the early stages of offending who have not yet entered the formal criminal justice system), and to then link these children with the appropriate services to help reduce their likelihood of reoffending. It is these services which should then have a direct impact on reducing FTEs and court proceedings.

Given the above, it was decided to focus this research on the effectiveness of the CDF process itself, using a more formative Outcome Harvesting methodology. Therefore, the research would now focus on determining if CDFs were achieving the revised outcomes (see table 3).

Additionally, the two outcome areas that were focussed mainly on reductions in the formal system were excluded as primary outcomes. The basis for this was that the immediate outcomes were believed to contribute to reductions in system involvement and thus these were important but more distal than some of the more immediate objectives of the CDFs. The result was the development of an updated outcome framework.

As outlined in the preceding methods section, part of the benefit of OH is to refine, update and reformulate the outcomes that are most proximal to the work. As such, this OH process reviewed the CDF material, as well as interview data, and proposed four new primary outcomes (see table 3).

Table 3: Updated primary outcomes

Outcome	Description
1	Improved partnership working across agencies and stakeholders are working together to achieve common goals
2	Increased capacity to understand the needs of children in the justice system
3	Relevant agencies participate regularly in the CDF meetings and share information where relevant
4	Relevant agencies contribute resources and identify suitable supports for children

These were defined in agreement with YJA, and if achieved, would reasonably be assumed to contribute to a range of more distal but important secondary, but also more specific outcome areas (see table 4). These included:

The validated outcome story

In order to substantiate these updated outcomes with relevant stakeholders, a multi-stage process was implemented. First, in-depth interviews were undertaken with a sample of CDF chairs. Interviews ranged between 35 minutes and 55 minutes with the average taking 38 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions informed by the preceding steps of the Outcome Harvest. Following the interviews, a number of themes emerged that produced a refined and validated outcome story. In particular, the interview data provided significant support for the four primary outcomes and in addition, helped to identify 25 secondary or specific outcomes that if implemented as intended, the CDFs could achieve (See table 4). Interestingly, the process uncovered a number of more specific outcomes that while the CDFs were attaining, were not originally intended. These included things like increased clarity around roles among member organisation, increased understanding of the root causes of offending, instilling hope among family member and professional development.

Table 4: Primary and specific CDF outcomes

	Overarching outcome area	Specific Outcomes	References	Intended
1	Improved partnership working across agencies and stakeholders are working together to achieve common goals	Increased clarity around roles and responsibilities and pressures	15	No
2		Improved understanding of service thresholds	12	No
3		Shared goals	12	Yes
4		Maintain supports in local community	6	Yes
5		Increases consistency in responses at local level	3	No
6	Increased capacity to understand the needs of children in the justice system	Reducing vulnerability	42	Yes
7		Increased understanding of the root cause of an individual's needs	58	No
8		Enhance organisational capacity	9	No
9		Reducing criminalisation	42	Yes
10		Increased advocacy	12	No

	Overarching outcome area	Specific Outcomes	References	Intended
11	Relevant agencies contribute resources and identify suitable supports for children	Efficiency with limited resources (shared problems)	42	No
12		Improved support pathways	54	Yes
13		Increase understanding of existing community services available	6	No
14		Identify gaps in communities	33	No
15		Identify system-level barriers to support	27	No
16		Reduce burden	21	No
17		Instil hope in families	15	No
18		Improved parental understanding of process	12	No
19	Relevant agencies participate regularly in the CDF meetings and share information where relevant	Better identification/prioritisation of children at risk	15	Yes
20		Reduce delay	3	Yes
21		Understand need in local context	3	No
21		Increased accountability	48	No
23		Joined up decision making	30	Yes
24		Professional development	6	No
25		Increased communication across agencies	24	Yes

Alignment with updated outcome areas

Following the interviews with key internal stakeholders and reformulation of outcomes, a survey was developed to capture how closely or not these outcomes aligned with the experiences of all stakeholders, internal and external.

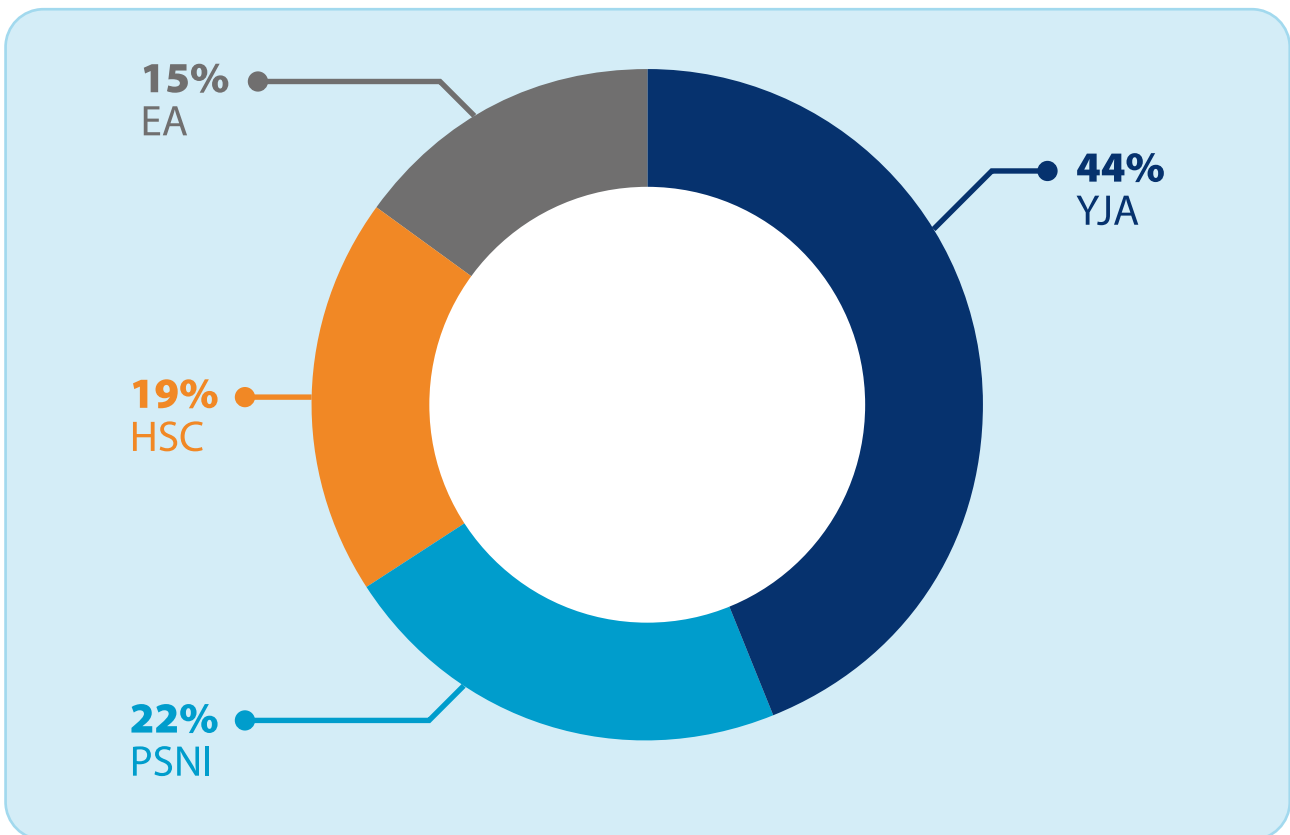


Figure 4: Survey completion by agency (%)

7 out of the 15 CDFs were invited to contribute. In total 27 individual's representing four key agencies responded (see fig. 4). Most responses from the YJA, however, responses were representative of all agencies. Professionals' roles varied between youth justice workers (33.3%), youth diversion officers (22.2%), HSC (social workers) (18.5%), EA (youth workers) (14.8%) and those who performed an administrative role within the CDFs (11.1%). Interestingly, no EWOs responded.

Respondents were asked to consider the four primary outcomes that had been harvested during the initial process and indicate their level of alignment (see fig. 5). On scale of 1-10, with 1 being no agreement and 10 being total agreement, almost three quarters (74%) of respondents score '8' or above, implying significant alignment with the definitions. Further, the same percentage of respondents also believed that these were outcomes that were feasibly achieved by the CDFs.

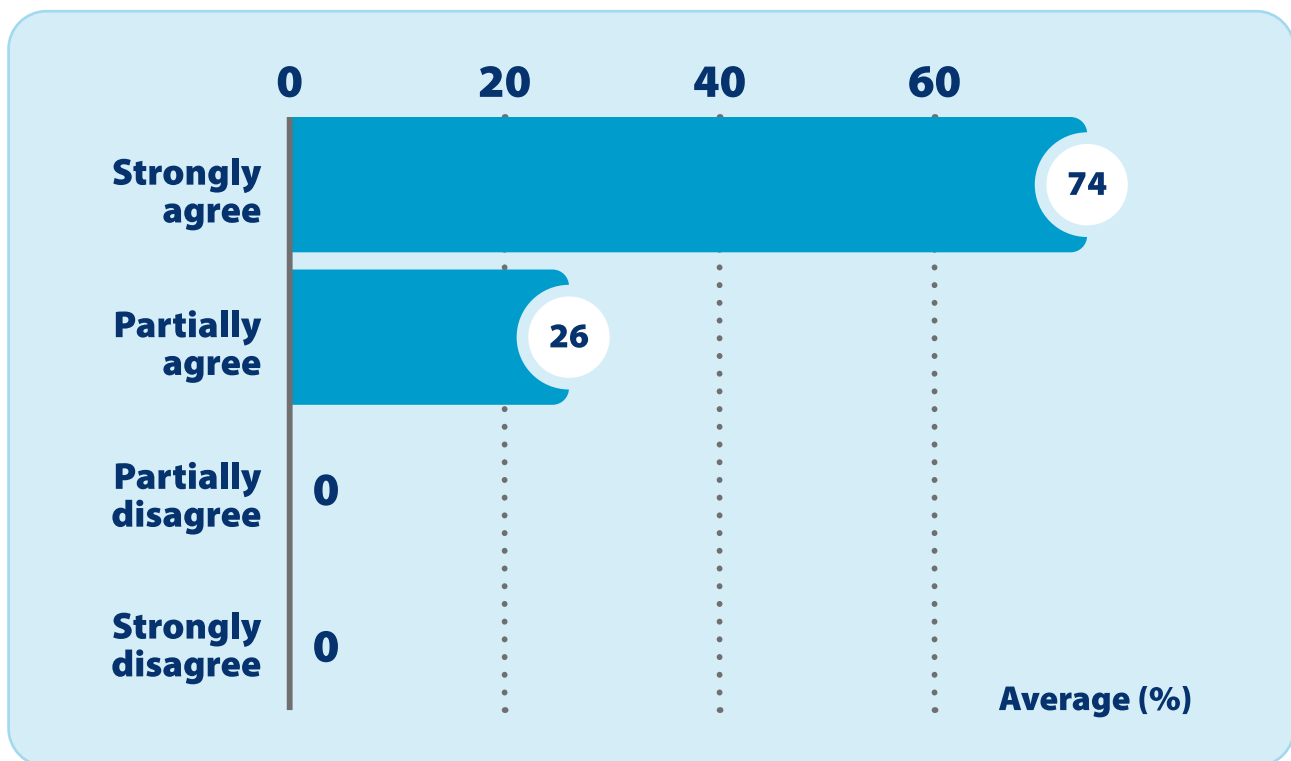


Figure 5: Agreement with the overall Outcomes Harvest

Prioritisation of the four outcome areas

In addition to seeking clarity around alignment on the outcomes of the CDFs, the 27 CDF respondents were also asked if they were aware of additional outcomes not captured in the Harvest. 96.3% indicated that there were no additional outcomes. 3.7% indicated that there were, however, upon analysis, the outcome that they outlined was in fact covered within the draft twenty-five specific outcomes (i.e., signposting).

Of the four primary outcomes that had been redefined during the process, CDF stakeholders were asked to prioritise them (see fig. 6). Across all agencies, it was partnership working that was most important, however, each of the other three outcome areas were included in the priorities. Interestingly, primary outcome priorities differed significantly between agencies. For example, 20% of HSC services (social services) prioritised information sharing as their number one priority area, while this was not of the same importance for any of the other agencies. Youth services and YJA prioritised an increased capacity to understand the needs of the young people, and this was not the main priority for either PSNI or HSC. Instead, the number one priority outcome area for PSNI was the identification of supports, one that was of lesser importance for all other partners, possibly because they tend to provide the services and supports. What is useful to acknowledge, however, is that despite varying priorities, the members are aligned on the four primary outcome areas and via the mechanisms of the CDFs, each agency appears to be content with the extent to which their priority outcome area/s are being met.

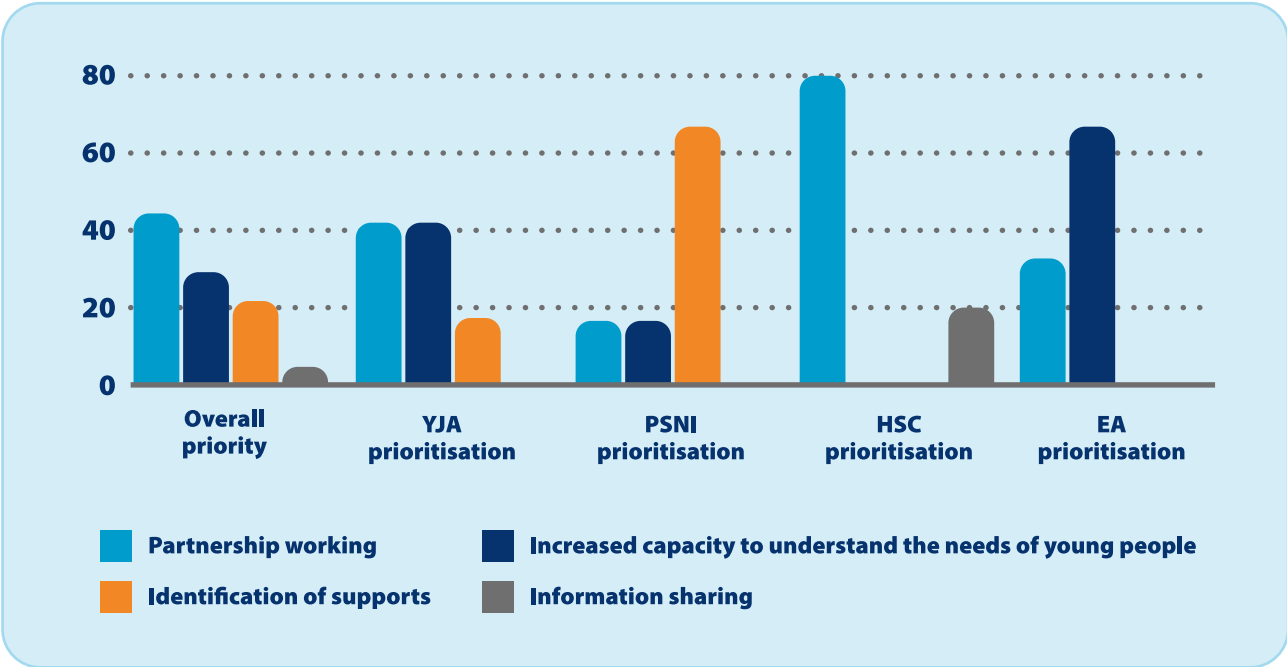


Figure 6: Primary outcome priorities (% overall and by agency)

Evidence supporting four outcome areas

It was evident that the respondents overwhelmingly supported the idea that the four outcome areas were being met by the CDFs (see fig. 7). While some differed in their strength of support, not one respondent believed that the CDFs were failing to attain these outcome areas. While we recognise the benefit to the forums when members are so strongly appreciate of their value, this process required more objective evidence.

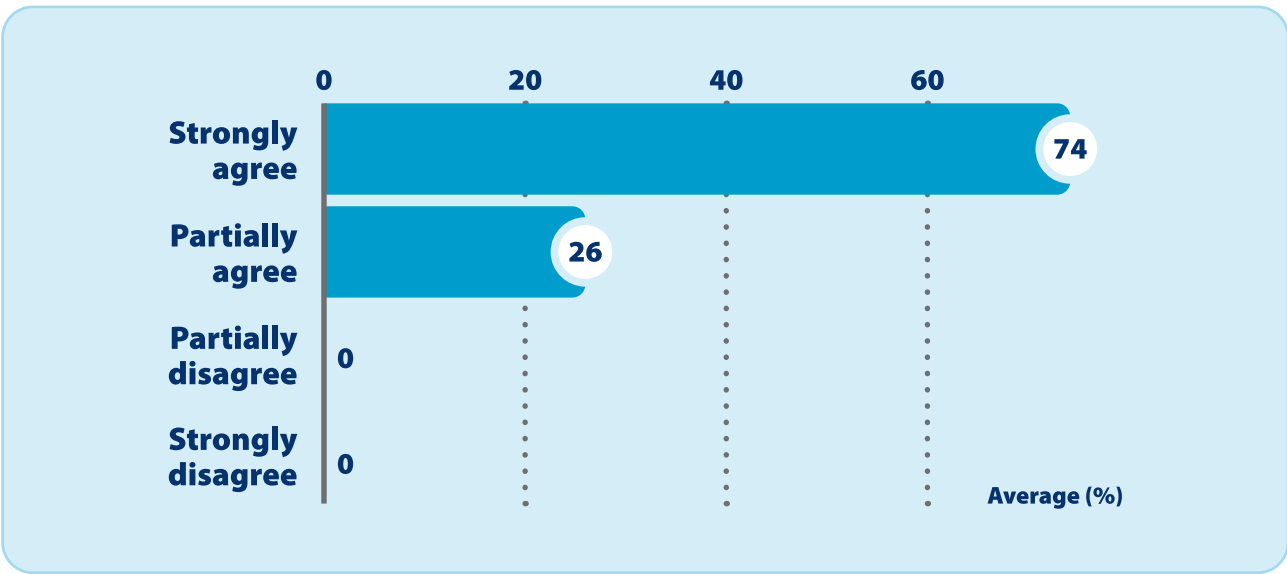


Figure 7: Agreement with the four primary outcomes

As well as survey and interview data, the redacted minutes of 44 CDF meetings across seven areas were coded and analysed to explore the extent to which evidence support the perceptions among stakeholders for the core outcome areas. Fig. 8 illustrates the proportion of data that was spread across the areas. Given the staggered nature of the scale-up, it is unsurprising that the proportion of minutes available across the CDFs were somewhat variable.

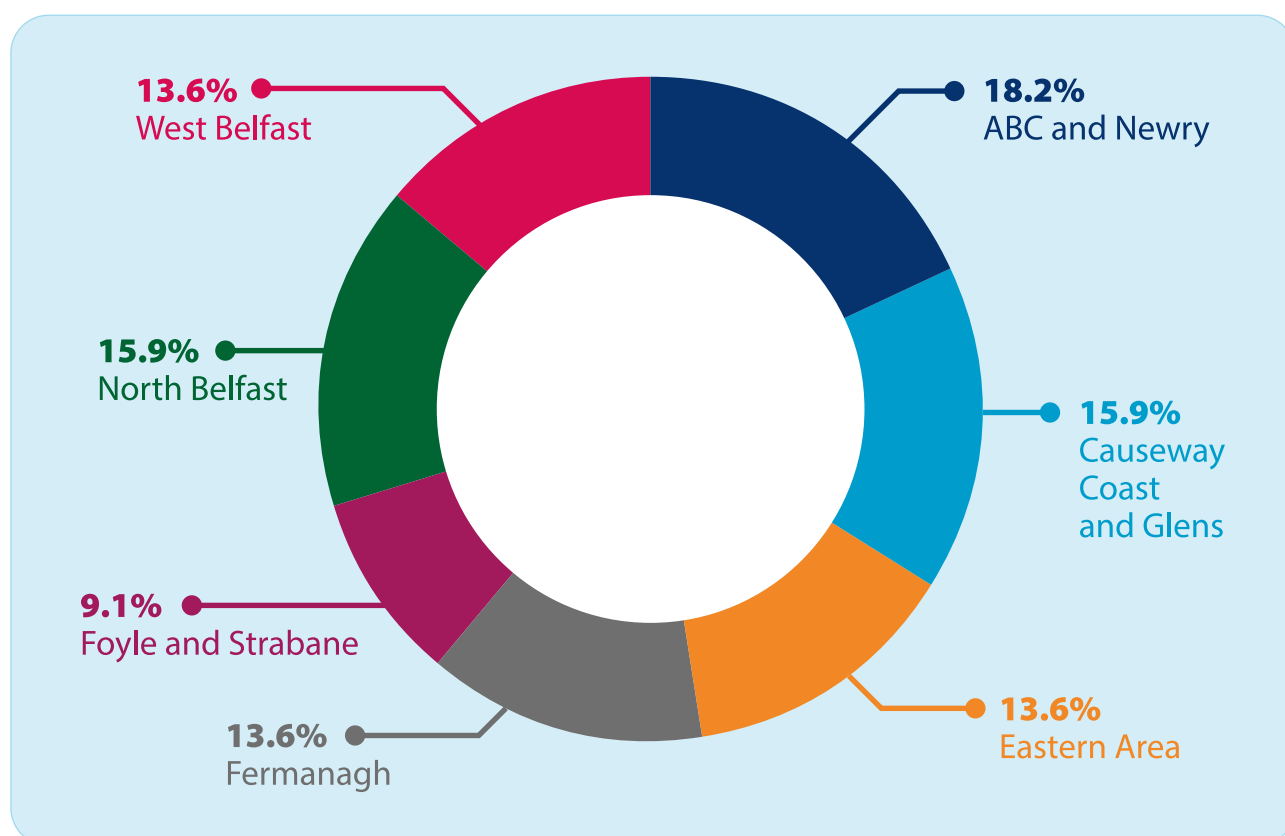


Figure 8: CDF representation across the redacted minutes

PRIMARY OUTCOME 1:

Improved partnership working across agencies and stakeholders are working together to achieve common goals

There was strong evidence from across the interview data, that while there had been previous structures intended to improve the outcomes of children and young people with similar characteristics as those going through the CDFs, there was something novel that currently existed and that wasn't present before.

[The CDF] is a much more progressive approach about diverting children away from the [formal justice] system and, and for us, that's been really, really key, you know, and I've been around long enough [to see a range of changes take place].

Central to the CDF is the presence of multiple statutory agencies. Indeed, this was one of the distinguishing features of the CDF compared with previous structures.

Historically...you know that was the old system, and I was part of that as well. I would have been invited to come along and share information about key children that we were identifying, but it was always disjointed... it was it was ad hoc, you know, in some areas there were a lot more progressive and in others it was just disjointed... Our view is that it wasn't really operational at a regional level. There was no full representation. So [now] we've got the police on board; the Trust's. OK, so local umm, trusts were involved.... Education as well. EWOs; and obviously ourselves.

This reflection demonstrated well the additional evidence in the form of redacted minutes and surveys among internal and external stakeholders. For instance, the minutes provided evidence of partnership working across 61.4% of CDF meetings. Most commonly represented were the Youth Justice Agency (who attended 100% of meetings), PSNI (which attended 93% of meetings), Health and Social Care Trusts (which attended 59% of meetings), Educational Welfare and Youth Services (which attended 43% of meetings). Thus, most consistently represented were Youth Justice Agency and PSNI, with youth services least likely to attend the meetings (see fig. 9). However, there was significant variation between the CDFs. For instance, youth services were significantly more likely to attend in Foyle and Strabane, while social services were least likely to attend in West Belfast. While youth services appeared to be happy to take referrals, their consistent presence at CDFs as standing members vacillated. For some CDFs, this was a gap.

We tried to bring on [youth services] but we have tried to bring them on board and I mean if I rang them, you know, [they would say] 'what you want us to do for you or what can we do, you know'? So there is that, and there's a really good rapport in all our areas here, but that's not as much as sitting on the CDF itself.

Similarly, there was significant variation in how EWOs attended. While it was noted during interviews that industrial processes and Union policies may have affected their engagement, the picture was actually more nuanced. While there was no evidence of Educational Welfare attending consistently in either ABC & Newry, Foyle and Strabane, or Fermanagh, representation was almost constant within the Eastern area. These observations imply that rather than agency commitment, the CDFs, like other structures, rely on relationships and good will at local level. As one interviewee noted, it wasn't always clear who decided who attended within each agency and at which level those attendees were drawn from.

I'm actually not sure of the answer of that. I don't know who allocated them and if you know who decided that or you know who to create it. Sometimes it could be both [people attend because they want to and they attend because their seniors told them to]. It could be all 'you have capacity. You bounce in there'. I don't know.

It appears that rather than being mandated to attend as a result of a strategic commitment to the structures, agencies attend (or not) depending on a number of other factors. For some participants, this had a material impact.

This is a diversion forum to have a discussion about, about the needs of the child and their family, and more importantly, which organization is best place to meet those needs. So if [the social worker or EWO] doesn't attend, or doesn't refer in to those meetings, then what's happening, in my view, [is that] it just becomes a justice forum and it's not really what it's designed to be.

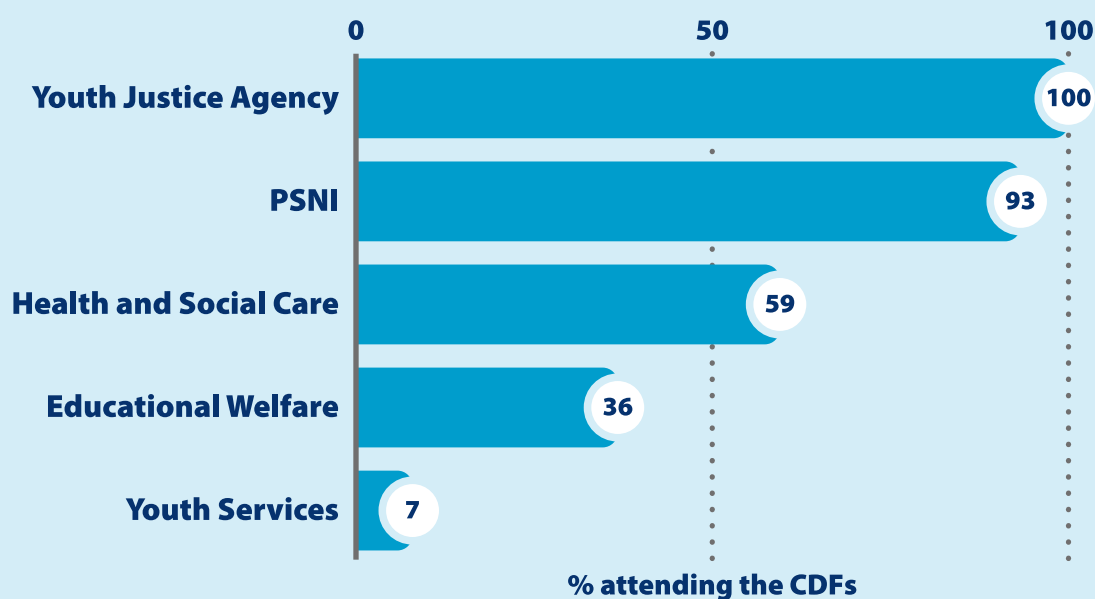


Figure 9: Agencies attending CDF meetings

PRIMARY OUTCOME 2:

Increased capacity to understand the needs of children in the justice system

Understanding the needs of young people coming into contact with the justice system was consistently cited across interviews as well as through the survey data. Indeed, the minutes demonstrated that in 43.2% of meetings, needs were analysed and documented. As one internal stakeholder noted:

We've invested all of our efforts...and I mean, from really 2020, we really started looking at a new approach. How can we develop systems and processes which identifies children at a much earlier stage and keeping them out of out of a formal system? So the CDFs, I believe has played a big role in this.

However, this process of understanding need was not only about getting alignment across agencies about the best supports that could be provided, but about understanding and agreeing who was not in need of additional support. This is an important objective given the legitimate concerns that exist around potential net-widening. That is, drawing children into a justice system where their needs could reasonably (and preferably) be met elsewhere (Muncie, 2004; Brown, 2005). This appears to have been an important part of the CDF process. While it provides a structure for agencies to consider cases brought to their attention, it is that consideration underpinned by a clearer, consistent and more coherent understanding of what is and what is not appropriate that could reduce the risk of net widening whilst at the same time responding to the more complex needs of some children before they escalate further. As noted by one interviewee:

And so, yes, the CDFs, I suppose the key principles are about identifying children at a much earlier stage. And what I mean, it's about identifying children, it's children who are involved in low level offending, within either the home, the community or school setting. So children who are actively involved in offending so children involved in domestic related incidents at home, and I just don't mean about having, you know, verbal arguments with parents. If we're talking about, you know, significant assaults, criminal damage and our children within the community who are involved in ASB. And it comes to the attention of local community or, or, or the place or even children within the, the school setting or assaults on pupils or thefts or criminal damage. So, one of the things that have to be really clear is the evidence base. And that's one of the things that I've really focused on. And I think we should. It's one of the things that, you know, in terms of terms of the guidance, we've spent a lot of time on the guidance that this we, we know we need to make sure that we have a clear rationale and evidence base...we need to be clear that are they meeting our criteria- so we're not interested in children who are smoking cigarettes or taking the whole teen a beer, right? Children should be really picked up by other, you know, services within the community, particularly the youth service. So we developed the guidance.

This was further supported by previous internal evaluation of the CDFs, something the Agency refer to as a *'light touch review'* which found that across the CDFs, there were many children who remained unnecessarily *'under review'*. This appears to have been in some ways a hangover of the past, where young people were involved in the justice system and could be better supported informally. The implication of the persistent reviews, however, was that agencies continued to share information about individuals without any well justified rationale. There is convincing evidence that this has changed significantly. The paperwork requires CDFs to document what new or existing evidence informs decisions and what reason there is to continue to monitor progress against desired outcomes. Not only had the paperwork changed to compel CDF Chairs to document this during meetings, but the records show that across the meetings coded, 68.8% of meetings involved CDFs case closures, and on average, only 1.19 young people were referred into the CDF during each meeting. In some incidences, closures were because the young people had engaged well and challenges had reduced and in others, the young people were not well suited for the CDFs, thus reducing the risk of net-widening.

While this outcome was highly evident across some of the CDFs, it was much less so within others. For example, in two of the CDFs, a needs analysis was consistently documented. For another, however, this was evidenced in less than one-third of meetings. Thus, there did not appear to be a clear or consistent mechanism across the CDFs to achieve consensus about what the specific needs of young people were at the point of referral, and the most appropriate responses to meet those needs. For example, one young person had sub threshold school attendance requiring educational welfare involvement. There were clear insights from the partners around family life, but there was no agreed plan documented to address this specific need. Instead, more generic responses were agreed.

You know, the people that are sitting on the CDF are supposed to take responsibility, not just for rocking up to a meeting, but an actual plan taking on board and linking in [with the other partners].

PRIMARY OUTCOME 3:

Relevant agencies contribute resources and identify suitable supports for children

While all four areas were observed, the primary outcome relating to identifying and sharing of resources was the least consistent, being observed in only 34.1% of CDF meetings. That is not to say that it did not happen and was not valued among the forums. Indeed, there was evidence across the CDFs that wider community resources were considered and signposting took place.

I mean, we always want looking for who's best place to actually work with this child, you know, because it's not always us we're trying to bring maybe one of the biggest things we tried- we have tried to bring Youth Services onto the Children's Diversion Forum as well because we signpost out to them. So, a young person is finished maybe doing a 12 week programme, whether it was a practitioner or with, with whoever. We, we try to get them back into their own community and use that capacity, so they're actually linked into something that's pro social.

What appeared to be of particular importance to some CDF members, and added value when compared with other structures, is the opportunity for advocacy arising out of a comprehensive needs analysis. For example, one CDF interviewee advised that given the waiting lists that exist for some assessments and/or supports, the CDF members were able (at least in some occasions) to advocate for more speedy referrals to be considered.

One of the biggest assets that we have is we're going to have a child come through CDF that's waiting on something coming into the system. So they could be waiting 6, 10-12 months. And what the parents are saying is 'I can't wait'... Or that they've been excluded from mainstream school... So there's- they feel that they've exhausted all avenues within, you know, their own capacity... And I can say 'look, we can work with you for that to maybe up to 12 weeks just sitting down and unpack what the heck's going wrong'? You know, what happened and how do we, you know, put pressure on other service, not pressure, but you know, try and link in with other services. So we reconnect you back to where you need to be as well as building capacity where the parents and the guardians and the child so that they feel that they are supported.

Despite the added value that this brought via the mechanism of the CDF, signposting, and in particular, advocacy, was clustered in some CDFs more than in others. In those that considered the array of resources available, the opportunities to enhance supports was evident during interviews. That said, the burden of intervention tended to fall most commonly onto the Youth Justice Agency, and in some cases, the wider community assets that existed were underused. For some CDF stakeholders in particular, this had the potential to cause additional challenges, because, while YJA could provide a service, they may not always be the most appropriate agency to do so.

And at times, we're not best meeting that need, but the other providers aren't in a place to do something with those vulnerabilities and they're part of the processes. So sometimes there's a response that we give and sometimes, I suppose we have to be careful. We can provide a service, but are we the appropriate people? And then at times, we're the only people that are maybe providing a service and there is still vulnerabilities in terms of offending... And in theory...we all have responsibilities. But suppose it comes back to the partner agencies having capacity to take on some of this work and they are state and a vision and a value to it by having a person coming to these meetings. But the processes don't seem to be as clearly in place to link them back into their system [and] some of the links in the local area aren't as clear. I don't have the staff to identify all local groups that might benefit. I just don't. We don't have capacity to do that.

Comments like this were not uncommon during interviews and speak to the variability in how agencies respond with concrete services and supports, and the degree to which agencies understood the resources available within local communities—a problem beset by highly changeable and time limited funding across community and voluntary organisations. Interestingly, however, the very existence of the structure created the conditions for other agencies to be more accountable for the services and supports that could be made available to those who require it.

PRIMARY OUTCOME 4:

Relevant agencies participate regularly in the CDF meetings and share information where relevant

Of particular emphasis was the primary outcome of sharing relevant information between the statutory partners. Interestingly, this outcome was the area cited as the least important of the four priority areas during the substantiation process, but was the most strongly evidenced across the other data. For instance, analyses of the minutes found that in almost every single meeting (97.6%), information sharing took place. During interviews, participants were clear that the potential was huge for the CDFs to really understand needs of children and young people from the perspective of agencies with a significant amount of information that was shared—thus illustrating the connections between outcome areas (see fig. 10).

[we can] Identify children who are coming to the tension of the police and local community, and it's about identifying which organisation is best place to meet the needs of that that particular child. That's it in a nutshell. And I think when it works, it's really, really positive. And if we look at some of the cases that are coming in.

When [agencies] come back with information on what is known and in what capacity he actually is working with them and what capacity have they engaged or disengaged, or where are things with them? Then they're discussed at the [CDF] and [partners] decide what's the most appropriate intervention to try and keep that child out of the system. Then that could be my staff working with some looking at the systems and raising capacity with parents or doing child parent violence programmes...

This observation held across several of the CDFs. While evidence of information sharing was widespread, the information did not always translate into a coherent needs analysis. As one interviewee indicated, while the framework is there and the people are there, there remains a need for some '...Meat and the bones to make sure that they deliver some sort of response to a shared problem.' While important, information sharing alone is insufficient and incidents aren't the same as needs. More evidence is required for understanding how the CDFs make sense of what was going in the life of a young person to inform the planning phase.

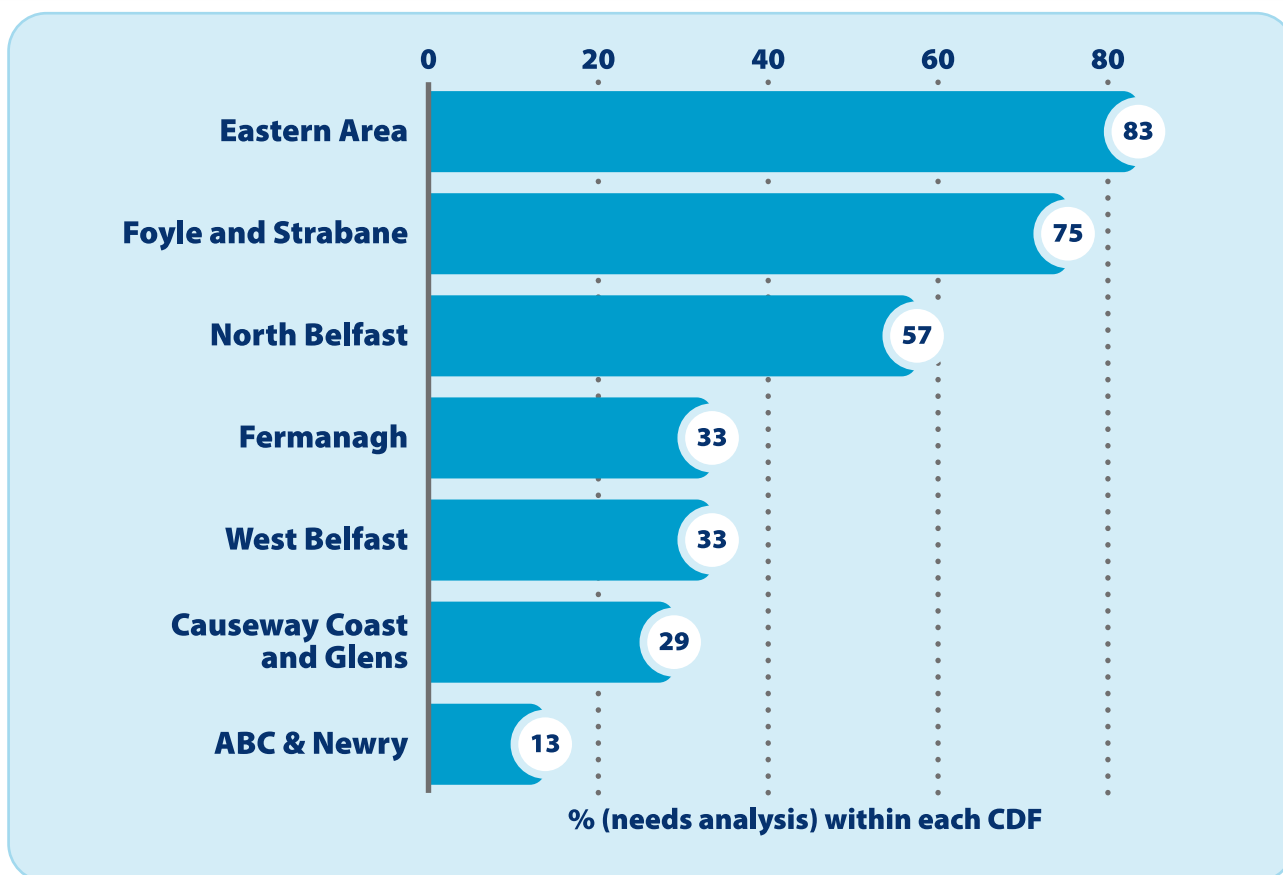


Figure 10: Percentage of CDF meetings where needs analysis is documented

In other words, the analysis of the redacted minutes demonstrate that for most CDFs, the four primary outcomes were logically connected, but for others, some of the primary outcomes were more common than the others, thus for some CDFs, it was not always clear how the information sharing led to clear and measurable actions that could be reasonably resourced or how opportunities were exploited to connect young people to existing community resources. In these cases, missing data on the criteria for referral and the primary outcome of interest reduced analytical potential, and it was in the same CDFs that actions that were documented were largely generic and not well connected to needs or offences. For example, these were most likely to describe actions such as *'review at next meeting'* or *'complete a piece of work'*, without a clear connections to the primary outcome areas.

Added value of the CDFs

Importantly, internal and external stakeholders were then asked to think about *'so what?'* What, if any, was the added value of the CDFs and impact of the outcomes on professionals, services and/or young people and their families? When reviewed, the responses fell into three broad themes: added value in regard to the membership of the CDF; the added value with regard to the process; and the added value with regard to the impact.

Despite the observations recorded during the review of priorities, information sharing was the single most important value added by the CDFs across all agencies (see fig. 11). While this can appear confusing, it may be the case that agencies prioritise the primary outcome of partnership working because from this number of outcome derivatives emerge, such as information sharing. Thus, when asked in a different way, respondents who are reflecting on the added value of working in partnership may report that one of the additives is better information sharing (even though this is not a priority as a single outcome area).

While the CDFs provided additional benefits via the membership, it was the ability to share information in a safe environment that was most strong. With regard to the process, it was an enabling structure that facilitated a practical response based on needs that members cited as adding most value (see fig. 11). The clarity of the process was also lauded-a testament to how the CDFs had been reviewed updated following the pilot phase. While accountability featured relatively commonly during interviews, across the wider surveys of internal and external stakeholders, it was the process to enhance opportunities for getting the right support at the right time that was reported to be of stronger value alongside a reduction in problem behaviour and offending (see fig. 11). Further, this clarity around who was and who was not appropriate to be supported through the CDFs appears to have reduced the risk that children are unnecessarily drawn into a system where statutory agencies discuss them.

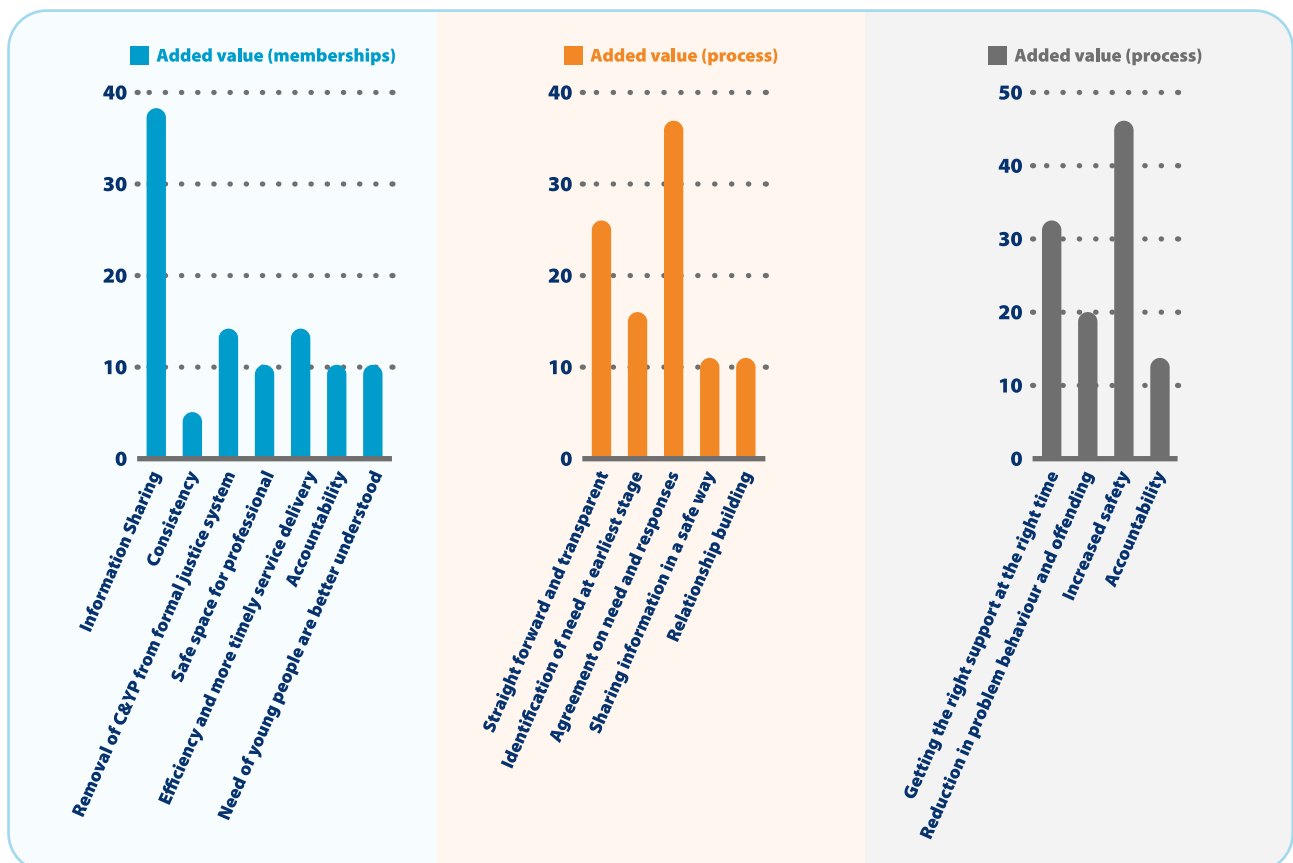


Figure 11: Added value

Interestingly, 64% of the specific outcomes that were identified during the Harvest were positive, but were unintended. That is, during the inception, pilot and initial scaling up of the structures, their impact in these areas were not considered. This implies that the CDFs, while contributing to four core areas that are important to the partners, their implementation has had a significant number of more latent multiplier effects. These can be easily and logically nested within the context of the four primary outcomes, however (see table 5). For instance, within primary outcome 1, the CDFs were also contributing to increased clarity around the roles and responsibilities of members. By participating regularly, participants also become more familiar with what were suitable and unsuitable referrals into other agencies and the sort of thresholds were expected for service delivery. This was said during interviews to reduce inappropriate referrals and the frustration between professionals when referrals were declined. Both of these, like other outcomes (see highlighted areas), were unintended.

Table 5: Intended and unintended outcomes

Overarching outcome area	Specific Outcomes	Intended
Improved partnership working across agencies and stakeholders are working together to achieve common goals	Increased clarity around roles and responsibilities and pressures	No
	Improved understanding of service thresholds	No
	Shared goals	Yes
	Maintain supports in local community	Yes
	Increases consistency in responses at local level	No
Increased capacity to understand the needs of children in the justice system	Reducing vulnerability	Yes
	Increased understanding of the root cause of an individual's needs	No
	Enhance organisational capacity	No
	Reducing criminalisation	Yes
	Increased advocacy	No
Relevant agencies contribute resources and identify suitable supports for children	Efficiency with limited resources (shared problems)	No
	Improved support pathways	Yes
	Increase understanding of existing community services available	No
	Identify gaps in communities	No
	Identify system-level barriers to support	No
	Reduce burden	No
	Instil hope in families	No
	Improved parental understanding of process	No

Overarching outcome area	Specific Outcomes	Intended
Relevant agencies participate regularly in the CDF meetings and share information where relevant	Better identification/prioritisation of children at risk	Yes
	Reduce delay	Yes
	Understand need in local context	No
	Increased accountability	No
	Joined up decision making	Yes
	Professional development	No
	Increased communication across agencies	Yes

Summary of findings

Approaches to youth justice are often difficult to capture, quantify and communicate, and as a result, few high-quality studies have emerged. Outcome Harvesting is a novel research method most useful when the activities being investigated are complex, have multiple moving parts and when the activities have already been implemented. As an approach, Outcome Harvesting proved very useful in the context of youth justice in Northern Ireland, in this specific case, for understanding the function of the CDFs in NI and then for examining the extent to which those outcomes were observed.

The initial outcome story changed during this process to identify 4 refined primary outcome areas and 25 secondary outcomes. These, if achieved, could reasonably be assumed to go some way to improve outcomes for children involved in offending behaviour.

Engagement with a sample of CDF members from across the four key agencies (YJA, PSNI, EA, HSCTs), established a high degree of alignment with the outcomes being observed. In other words, those involved in the forums agreed with these.

Different agencies, however, prioritised these four primary outcomes in different order. For the YJA, partnership working and increased capacity to understand the needs of young people were the most important outcomes. For PSNI, it was the identification of supports; for HSCTs, it was partnership working; and for EA, increased capacity to understand the needs of young people was the number one priority outcome area.

Through the coding and analysis of 44 CDF meeting minutes, there was strong evidence to support the observation that CDFs achieved the 4 primary outcomes (see fig. 12).

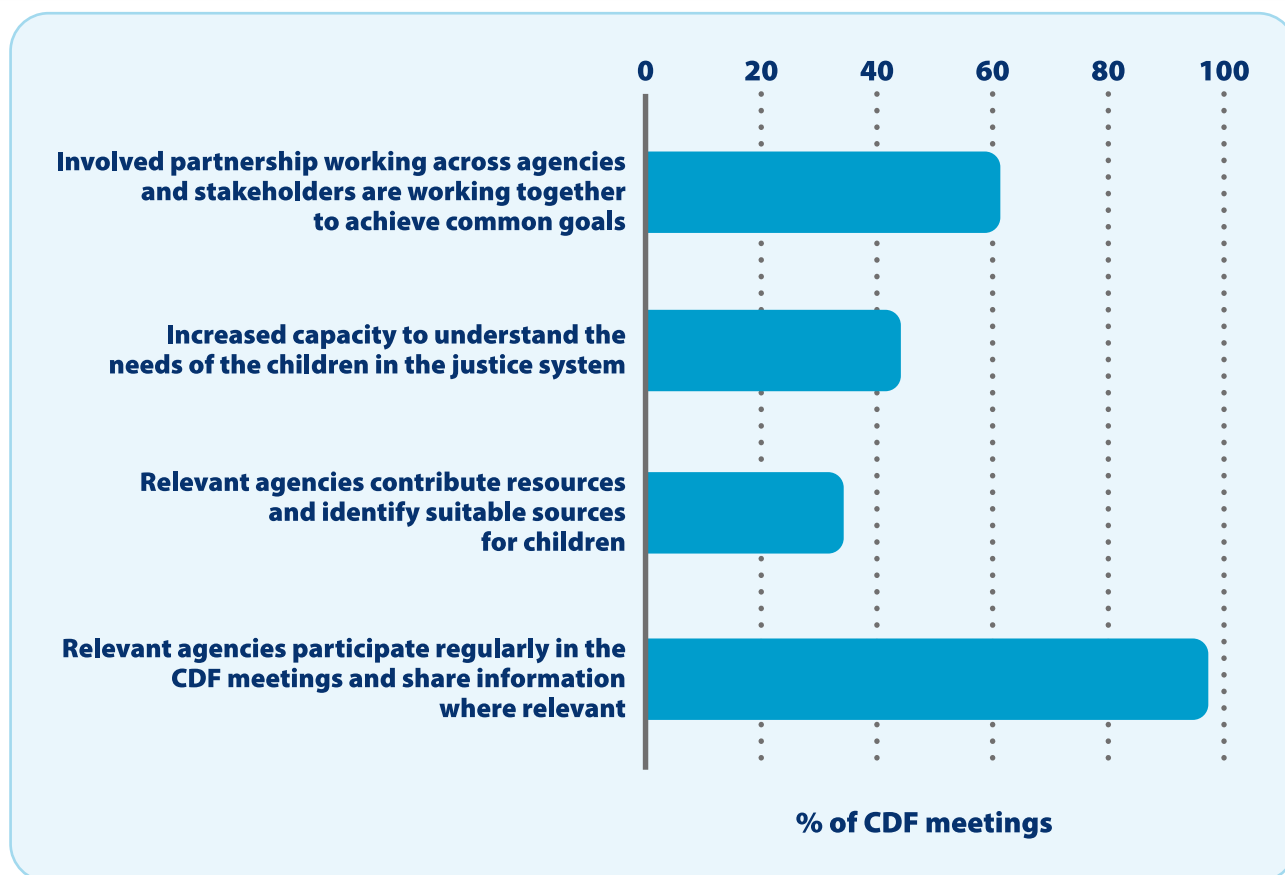


Figure 12: % of CDF meetings where outcomes were observed

Better partnership working, the ability to share information in a safe and ethical way; identifying and responding to the needs of children in a coordinated way; and identifying and sharing resources that exist across agencies were all believed to contributing to an improvement in how youth justice is implemented in ways that are consistent with international standards.

Conclusions and recommendations

Methodologically, Outcome Harvesting provides the basis for genuine participatory, iterative and emergent evaluation processes to emerge (Abboud and Claussen, 2016), and is particularly useful for interventions such as CDFs where there are multiple stakeholders, competing organisational priorities, variation in how members understand offending behaviours and where the complexities of individuals accessing the CDFs are similarly complex. Outcome Harvesting provides the basis for not only illuminating the process and outcomes related to CDFs but also for actively engaging stakeholders in a process that facilitates critical thinking, reflection and also trust between those involved. This method also addresses the gaps identified by Rehill and Muller (2024) around the lack of high-quality and robust evaluation designs in the youth justice context.

This Outcome Harvesting process reviewed the extent to which CDFs feasibly contributed to outcomes defined by the Youth Justice Agency. Following this, four new Outcomes were described during an in-depth and collaborative process with the Agency. Following a separate substantiation process with wider stakeholders and alignment on these descriptors, routinely collected data, survey data and redacted minutes, as well as interview data was collated, coded, and analysed to assess the extent to which there was evidence to support the attainment of these four primary outcomes. As summarised in table 6, the process not only led to greater clarity, coherence and consensus around the desired impact of the CDFs, but found convincing evidence across the data to support the contention that these four primary outcomes are being attained.

Table 6: Summary of findings

Final Outcome descriptors	Evidence	Key learning
<p>Improved partnership working across agencies and stakeholders are working together to achieve common goals</p>	<p>In-depth interviews</p> <p>Redacted minutes</p> <p>Survey responses</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CDFs have facilitated increased trust across key statutory agencies via regular and more consistent meetings. 2. Two agencies in particular have collaborated most closely during CDFs and these have tended to be the agency making the majority of the referrals (PSNI) and the agency taking the majority of referrals (YJA). 3. The CDFs have demonstrated how to get alignment around issues of concern and a multi-agency agreement on the most appropriate response. 4. Representativeness varies across the CDFs and with more consistent engagement, partnership could be enhanced further. <p>It is recommended that to complement 'bottom up' commitments by practitioners at a local level, a 'top down' commitment is made by senior leaders across the key statutory agencies to contribute to the CDFs.</p> <p>It is recommended that consideration is given as to how to facilitate more consistent engagement from youth services</p>

Final Outcome descriptors	Evidence	Key learning
<p>Increased capacity to understand the needs of children in the justice system</p>	<p>In-depth interviews</p> <p>Redacted minutes</p> <p>Survey responses</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CDFs have demonstrated that often different agencies hold different pieces of the puzzle, that when combined, provide a fuller picture of the needs of children and young people. 2. CDFs have demonstrated through this evaluative process to add value to business as usual, enhancing how different sectors make sense of complex challenges. CDFs provide a stable structure for differences of opinion and different conceptual lenses to be discussed with a view of achieving alignment. 3. There is some variation in how CDFs translate information into a needs analysis that is then logically connected to a support plan agreed by all members <p>It is recommended that CDF chairs consider a more standardised mechanism for capturing the most relevant needs of children and young people and making clear and coherent connections between those needs and the plans that are then agreed.</p> <p>It is also recommended that as CDFs’ purpose, process and outcomes become more standardised, a mechanism exists to facilitate monitoring fidelity to that model, while also ensuring that CDFs have the flexibility to take decisions within the context of local context, culture and available resources.</p>

Final Outcome descriptors	Evidence	Key learning
<p>Relevant agencies participate regularly in the CDF meetings and share information where relevant</p>	<p>In-depth interviews</p> <p>Redacted minutes</p> <p>Survey responses</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Information sharing is one of the most strongly evidenced outcomes for the CDFs. There is evidence across CDFs that all agencies participate actively, and where children are known to them, information is provided. This is done in a safe and legal space and adds significant value to business as usual. 2. Efforts have been made to ensure that as far as possible, personal information relating to children and young people who have consented to the CDF is reviewed for the shortest time possible. 3. Clear criteria has enabled CDFs to be more aware of appropriate and inappropriate cases for the forums. This increases opportunities for children to benefit from the supports that they need while reducing the risks that other children, not in need of support, are drawn into the system. <p>It is recommended that where relevant, information from the community and voluntary sector is augmented with family, school and other inputs to provide a fuller overview and to provide a space for the sector without comprising data sharing protocols.</p>

Final Outcome descriptors	Evidence	Key learning
Relevant agencies contribute resources and identify suitable supports for children	Redacted minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is substantial evidence that the CDFs provide the basis for aligning agencies with different strategic priorities on supports for children and young people and considering how those support will be accommodated within a local context. 2. Consideration of community-based supports is variable, with some CDFs making more use of these than others. 3. YJA accounts for the majority of onward referrals. 4. There is variability in how concerns and enhanced with a needs analysis, to then connect to a coherent programme of supports that is sufficiently well documented. <p>It is recommended that as part of a high-level commitment to the CDFs, agencies specify more clearly their potential for resource allocation (e.g., time, services, advocacy, and programmes).</p> <p>It is recommended that consideration is given to how the CDFs can make more consistent connections between the needs of children and young people being referred into the forum, and the supports that are available at a community level.</p>

While perennial, youth crime is often understood as a failure to meet needs. Sometimes these needs are straightforward and sometimes these needs are complex, requiring agencies with statutory responsibilities for youth focussed outcomes to respond in ways that are informed by evidence.

Outcomes had initially been defined with regard to the reduction on offending. While this is clearly the ultimate goal, the outcomes that CDFs could reasonably contribute to that would lead to reduced offending were reviewed and refined. In addition to the primary outcomes that had been refined, 25 specific outcomes were identified, with 64% of those not originally intended to be such. Thus, there was considerable latency contained within the CDFs that had not been well illustrated prior to this process.

This process not only provides evidence around the extent to which these outcomes had been met, but provides a more coherent basis on which the CDFs can monitor progress against the outcomes agreed by multiple agencies, central to which is the process of multi-agency working itself.

While its meaning and application varied greatly, multi-agency working is synonymous with a coming together of various agencies to address common problems. The extent to which this 'coming together' is applied exists on a spectrum-ranging from cooperation to collaboration. Evidence from this Outcome Harvest found that in many cases, partners had moved beyond attending, to meaningfully collaborating.

One of the benefits of the CDFs is not only that agencies have a structure within which to safely collaborate, but have a single entry point for children and young people's needs to be considered, and within which their needs can be responded to. In theory, a standardised approach across all CDFs could become synonymous with the concept of No Wrong Door-the idea that those in need of supports and services do not need to traverse multiple pathways to get that support, nor have to repeat their stories at each point of that journey, and that children and young people in need of support in one area, are equally likely to receive the same type of support as they would in another area. This Outcome Harvest demonstrated the potential for CDFs to provide this trauma-informed and evidence-based response. In terms of future development and ongoing evaluation, a number of recommendations are also presented (see table 6). These recommendations are formative in nature and build upon the insights derived from this process.

In conclusion, CDFs are underpinned by a programme logic that understands that behaviour reflects need-or more specifically-unmet need. It is informed by an appreciation that no one agency possess all of the insights nor holds all of the answers. The CDFs' successes demonstrate the potential of supporting children and young people earlier and often outside of the formal justice system. The clarity around coherence that has come from multi-agency working has also enabled partners to differentiate between children in need and those not in need of structured supports, thus reducing the potential for net-widening. Finally, the CDFs provide the basis for a coherent response to policy obligations requiring children's services to cooperate to improve the wellbeing of all children and young people, including those at risk of interfacing with the justice system. Informed by this review, future iterations hold the promise of adding further value to these areas.

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