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"If I had had a me": the benefits and challenges of involving children with lived experience in youth justice services

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ABSTRACT:

This article presents the findings from an ongoing evaluation of a partnership project between a youth justice service and an independent charity which supports the involvement of children with lived experience of youth justice services in work with other young people who have offended and with policy makers and service providers.

The research involved the secondary analysis of project records and 15 semi-structured interviews with youth justice managers and practitioners and the charityâ€™s staff as well as representatives from external organisations with whom it has worked. The analysis focuses on the nature of activities undertaken, the 'theory of change' driving these activities, the perceived benefits of the work as well as some of the challenges involved.

The findings suggest positive outcomes for children in terms of increased engagement and participation, improvements in confidence and self-esteem and the development of personal, social, health and educational skills. The project represents a compelling example of what child first diversion looks like in practice.

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The article adds to existing knowledge of the benefits and challenges of involving children with recent experience of the youth justice system in service delivery and in co-production work with policy makers and service providers. It also offers insights into recent changes in youth justice policy in England and Wales, in particular the commitment to treating children as children first.

"If I had had a me": the benefits and challenges of involving children with lived experience in youth justice services

Introduction

Involving service users with 'lived experience' in efforts to improve services is now an established element of social policy (McIntosh and Wright, 2021). A growing evidence base demonstrates the gains to be had from involving peer mentors in a range of criminal justice settings (Fletcher and Batty, 2012; Buck, 2021), including youth justice (Creaney, 2020). Such work is not without its challenges and frustrations, as is evidenced, for example, in a recent article by a former child offender, Kierra Myles, who argued that more needed "to be done to ensure professionals with lived experiences are employed, heard and respected." Myles describes her experiences of care, custody and supervision where she said that she learnt not to trust the services around her and that she did not "meet a single person who had similar or shared experiences" (Myles, 2022: 13)

Myles said that she took a decade to break down the barriers to being allowed to work with children. She argued passionately that those with lived experiences should not be restricted to voluntary roles, and says she experienced a power imbalance in her work, even when employed as a professional) This has a resonance with the project we describe and evaluate as it was started by an ex-offender with a serious offending history, who has succeeded in developing a service within a youth justice team that *employs* former child offenders to act as supporters and mentors to the children that attend there.

We adopt the terminology of the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and refer to children in the youth justice system throughout this article (though interestingly the practitioners we quote later refer to 'young people'). The emphasis of the YJB on children is clear and highlights the importance of projects which have elements of 'lived experience' in fulfilling their objectives:

> "In our strategic plan, we also set out our vision for a Child First youth justice system. The benefits of achieving this vision are immense, not just for children but for all of us. If children are enabled to reach their potential, the benefit for society is obvious. This is not only through reductions in offending but through positive gain for all children. We are clear that this change will not happen overnight and in the past year we began a programme of activity which we will build upon…we continued to seek, listen and capture the views and opinions of children with experience of the youth justice system, including those who support them. We also developed a programme of work with youth offending teams to deliver pathfinder projects related to diversion, a key part of the Child First principle, *and to evaluate the value of lived experience in preventing reoffending*." (YJB, 2021a:3, our italicised emphasis)

This article reports on the findings from an ongoing evaluation of one of the six pathfinder projects referred to here. The project is led by a charity embedded within and alongside a youth justice service (YJS) based in London, England. It employs peer support navigators who have themselves previously attended the project whilst serving community orders. They have their own office and the freedom to move throughout the building.

The findings discussed here allow for some reflection on whether, how and in what ways 'embedding' lived experience in service delivery contributes and conforms to the YJB's wider 'child first' agenda. In key respects, we suggest, the charity appears better able to follow 'child first' principles, precisely because of its independence. At the same time, the YJS's investment in the charity demonstrates a shared commitment to these principles and there are indications that the service has become more 'child-centred' in practice by dint of the charity's presence and impact. Overall, there are undoubtedly questions regarding the transferability of the model but also significant possibilities. It requires youth justice services to be open to letting peer mentors have the freedom to approach children in the office, to offer support and to be seen as an integral element in the rehabilitation of the children.

Our account begins with a review of literature on the benefits and challenges of involving those with lived experience in criminal justice settings and then describe the policy context which led to the charity securing YJB funding, above all the shift towards a 'Child First' approach. Next, we introduce the research on which the article draws, briefly outlining the aims and methodology. We then present our findings, describing the project's origins and development and activities, the implicit 'theory of change' which underpins its work and the perceived benefits of the work as well as the principal challenges. Finally, we reflect on the implications of this study of one amongst many diversionary models available (Kelly and Armitage, 2015) for debates as to the direction of youth justice policy more generally. Is involving children with lived experience in youth justice services in the ways described here simply an additional string to the bow, or is there a glimpse here of what the future might look like post-abolition of the youth justice system (Case and Haines, 2021; Smith, 2021)?

Learning From Experience

Sandhu (2017) writes that "history illuminates the power of individuals and communities who have worked to solve the social problems they have directly experienced" (ibid.: 5), referencing the women's rights movement, the civil rights movement, Alcoholics Anonymous, the first safe house for victims of domestic violence and the family of the murdered British teenager, Stephen Lawrence, as examples. Although we might note that none of these social problems have yet been "solved", the wider truth is that social change can come from involving those with experience. As Sandhu says, lived experience denotes a specific form of expertise, part 'factual', part emotional and with an authentic quality to it, not available to ordinary experts. This is hardly news to researchers. A literature search including the words 'lived experience' and 'crime' will generate any manner of PhD theses investigating the 'lived experiences' of drug users, or victims of sexual abuse, or gang members, tapping into such experiences being the sine qua non of phenomenological, and more broadly, ethnographic approaches to social research (McIntosh and Wright, 2021). At a common-sense level too, the power of lived experience is easily recognisable. 'It's difficult to explain if you were not there' or 'you will understand when you are older' are everyday phrases which most of us have used to signify that nothing quite beats actually experiencing something to understand what that feels like.

In a foreword to Barry et al.'s (2016) evaluation of User Voice Prison and Community Councils, Shadd Maruna observes that the absence of people with lived experience of the criminal justice system from efforts to facilitate desistance is peculiar.

> "No one expects someone to become a plumber without gaining some training, without some interaction with other plumbers. No one expects a person to just become a doctor or a football player or a computer programmer on one's own. To learn these roles, people need role models to teach us the tricks of the trade and guide us through the difficult transition involved.
>
> For some reason, however, we expect prisoners to know how to become successful ex-prisoners "on their own" without exposing them to clear role models or mentors on this difficult journey" (ibid: ii).

Although Maruna alludes here to the mentoring role which User Voice staff, themselves ex-prisoners, played in supporting current inmates who were volunteer members of prison and community councils, the councils themselves exemplify another role which those with either current or previous experience of the criminal justice system can fulfil, i.e. as advisers on, or co-producers of, policy and practice (Buck, 2021). The evaluation of the councils, echoing earlier findings (Solomon and Edgar, 2004; Schmidt, 2013 – both cited in Barry et al., 2016), was positive in both respects. The council 'model' was judged to have secured higher levels of engagement of prisoners and service users and to have increased their personal and skills development, access to role models and opportunities for civic engagement. This in turn brought material benefits to overall service provision which had improved aspects of the quality of life for prisoners and service users, raising the perceived legitimacy of the prison and community-based services amongst them and reducing the number of problematic incidents and complaints (ibid., 2016).

In the United States, an earlier and more radical vision of how to 'involve' those with lived experience was championed by Eddie Ellis, former Director of Community Relations for the New York City Black Panther Party (Gray, 2013). Imprisoned for the murder of someone he maintains he had never met nor had any possible reason to kill, the conviction having been secured on the basis of two police officers' testimony, Ellis worked as a teacher and political organiser, both inside prison and on release after 22 years. Inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970) model of 'Education for Liberation' and in the face of prison brutality and oppression, Ellis was not about increasing service users' engagement so much as their defence mechanisms and saw the goal as enabling resistance rather than facilitating desistance. In one interview (Vasquez, 2003) Ellis described his vision for an organisation comprised of people with criminal convictions that would campaign for the reform of what he termed the 'criminal punishment system' in the US.

In the UK, the value of involving individuals with lived experience of the criminal justice system has tended to be seen in terms of how they can help those currently in the system to desist from offending and construct a more positive future. Erwin James, for example, in his prison diary for The Guardian newspaper, wrote admiringly of fellow prisoner 'the Kid's' work with children serving community sentences at a local YOT, describing his role as being

to "to try to get them to understand where persistent offending could lead" (James, 2003: 160). Such peer mentoring was one of several forms of mentoring developed within youth justice in the 1990s (Porteous, 2005) when correctionalism was the spirit of the times (Goldson, 2000). Desistance from offending remains an important indicator of the effectiveness of peer mentoring to the present day but other benefits such as providing 'a bridge to engagement and employment' and 'working toward reform' of the criminal justice system are also identified (Buck 2021).

Creaney's (2020) interviews with children and professionals in a youth justice setting concerning their views of peer mentoring emphasise the value of the 'experiential knowledge' of current and former offenders. Peer mentors were said by children to embody and exemplify what could be achieved by someone who had 'walked in their shoes' and to be relatable, authentic and credible. They could offer practical guidance on what to expect – in court for example - and their experience of similarly difficult life circumstances made them easier to talk to and well placed to empathise with children in trouble. Such qualities were seen as integral to the development of a trusting, collaborative but also child-centred relationship, something valuable in itself as well the basis, potentially, for effective engagement with other interventions/programmes the child might be involved in.

In terms of barriers and limitations, Creaney notes that some professionals had a risk averse outlook which made them cautious about the suitability of young offenders as mentors given their own recent record, whilst some of the children interviewed also expressed apprehension about associating with other current or former offenders. Others were just not interested in having a peer mentor, reluctant to spend additional time and effort on a non-compulsory element of their order. In Buck's (2021) review of peer mentoring in criminal justice settings in general, she observes three key challenges. Efforts to empower individuals may be overwhelmed by (1) the punitive context in which they are delivered; (2) the conflicting pressures of their day to day living environment (in prison or the community); or (3) the difficulty of obtaining more than short-term funding.

'Child First': A more benign policy context?

In one sense the very fact that the YJB is part funding the work discussed suggests that the changing policy context has diminished some of these barriers. Adopting a child first approach means almost by definition being less focused on the risk factors associated with offending and more so on the needs, strengths and goals of children who have offended (Case and Haines, 2015; Day, 2022). The YJB's strategic plan for 2021-24 is explicit in contrasting the thinking behind what was once 'the new youth justice' (Goldson, 2000) with the evidence and theory underpinning current policy:

> "Child First recognises children according to their age, development, maturation and their potential as they grow into adulthood. Previously, perspectives of children's involvement in the youth justice system focused on managing a child's offending behaviour and the risks they were considered to pose. However, in recent years, evidence has demonstrated that effective prevention is driven by focusing on children's needs; identifying their strengths and creating opportunities that realise

> their potential. Evidence also tells us that contact with the youth justice system can increase the likelihood of children reoffending. This means that we should prevent as many children as possible from coming into contact with the system. (YJB, 2021b: 11)".

This represents an extraordinary about turn, coming from the body once charged with implementing the risk factor prevention paradigm and which oversaw, in the years immediately after it was created, a significant and quite deliberate expansion in the number of children prosecuted and imprisoned (Bateman, 2020). The irony is all the greater given that the contemporary narrative has its origins in a book by Haines and Drakeford (1998) published in the same year the YJB was established[i]. Nevertheless, on the face of it, the emphasis on diversion and the deliberate eschewing of risk factors as the basis for intervention would seem to put clear blue water between the youth justice system created under New Labour and that envisioned today.

In practice, things do not appear that simple. As Day (2022) observes, the risk factor 'mindset' has been difficult to dislodge from the youth justice system at different levels. The move from Asset to Asset Plus, as an assessment tool gives a more nuanced and less actuarial approach to risk management as the scoring system of key indicators is discontinued.

Nationally, however, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation has continued to judge youth offending services according to their procedures for assessing risk and developing appropriate ways of addressing and managing offending behaviour (Bateman 2020, Hampson 2018), apparently contradicting the YJB's change of direction. At the level of youth offending services, not least because of the contradictory messages from above, different 'models of practice' have been identified (Smith and Gray, 2019), ranging from those that represent a clear commitment to child-first principles to those still concerned first and foremost with reducing offending and protecting victims and the public. Unsurprisingly, the confusion and anxiety extends to individual youth justice managers and staff. On the basis of her own research with professionals, Day suggests that the legacy of the 'previous perspectives' now denigrated by the YJB has been to create "a 'risk averse culture' and a workforce that is fearful of 'getting it wrong' and being subject to scrutiny and sanctions" (2022: 8) if they do not continue to factor in riskiness. Moreover, there remains for some a conviction that the dangers posed by children who have offended demands a risk-management approach.

In respect of diversion programmes and projects, Richards' (2014), Kelly and Armitage's (2015) and Smith's (2021) research also point to ambiguity and contradictions in the way diversion has been operationalised in recent years. Diversion might mean diversion from the criminal justice system or diversion from offending behaviour; it could apply at the point of arrest, or entry to court or to prison, it could be targeted within an overall risk management framework or conceived principally in terms of meaningfully engaging vulnerable children with other services such as health and education. Moreover, Smith (2021) argues that even the diversionary model espoused and developed in line with the 'children first' philosophy ultimately remained wedded to the goal of reducing offending, with indicators suggesting

that the model had decreased re-conviction rates cited as evidence that it had worked, by its proponents. To truly escape the criminalising logic of a system designed to punish, diversionary initiatives need, Smith suggests, to be independent of that system and part of a wider transformation based first and foremost on children's rights. To be fair, in their recent contribution to the debate, Case and Haines (2021), arrive at a very similar conclusion - the ultimate logic of the Child First philosophy, they argue, is the "abolition of the construct of offending" and with it of the whole youth justice edifice.

The Research

The goals of the research study reported on here are described by the YJB as being to "evaluate the use of lived experience as a tool to help prevent reoffending" and "to promote good practice in relation to diversionary activity" (YJB, 2021a: 24). The first objective illustrates the enduring salience of tackling offending behaviour within child first policy referred to above (2022). The second signals as much interest in process than outcomes. Accordingly, the research team chose to adopt a qualitative approach designed to collect data on the project's origins and development, the 'theory of change' it seeks to put into practice, the ingredients of practice deemed to be effective and its perceived benefits. In the first phase reported on here, this has involved analysing existing project records and reports and fifteen semi-structured interviews with project staff (4), with YJS practitioners (6) and managers (3) and with representatives of external organisations (2) with which it has worked, including the YJB itself. Fifteen interviews were conducted, the majority online (12) via Zoom and three (with the Peer Service Navigators) held face to face at the charity's premises within the YJS. With one exception, all interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Middlesex University Law School Ethics Committee.

Sampling was non-random and purposeful and in part convenience based. A list of 25 potential interviewees was provided by the charity's CEO but although the researchers invited all of them to participate, ten were unavailable due to being absent through sickness, maternity leave or for other reasons unknown. Participants were selected on the basis that they had worked with or managed the project but are not necessarily representative of all who have done this. Without exception these interviewees spoke favourably about the project and were in a sense 'carriers of the faith' regarding the value of involving those with lived experience. However, since the primary purpose is to understand why, rather than whether, the project is a success story (and why it is so considered), this limitation does not constitute a major barrier.

The analysis of the interview data followed the broad themes referred to above as guiding the data collection process and used as sub-headings below. Our aim was to provide a faithful and accurate representation of the knowledge, views and feelings of interviewees as a whole. For example, the importance attached to 'lived experience' in our account of why the project appears to be effective reflects the weight and significance given to it by those people we spoke to with the quotations selected as evidence chosen because they convey well a widely voiced sentiment.

Findings

Origins and Development

The YJB funding is for a partnership project between a YJS and the charity which was created in 2016 and situated from the beginning within the YJS building. Conceived as an independent organisation sitting within/alongside a multi-agency statutory service which, in the words of its CEO, the aim was to "offer young people an opportunity to volunteer, to have a voice, also work alongside youth offending service staff… and most importantly to use their lived experience to support other young people in the criminal justice system".

The basic model underpinning the programme was piloted in the first year. Initially a 'Personal Social Health Education' (PSHE) programme focused on developing self-esteem and confidence and developing communication skills was delivered to children referred through the YJS and partner organisations. Of those who completed this programme, a smaller group chose to become what are now called 'Peer Support Navigators' (PSNs), working with other children at the (then) Youth Offending Service. Over time and in this way, children who first came across the charity as service users themselves have graduated to become first volunteers, then, for some, paid sessional workers and finally, in a small number of cases, full-time employees. A former female child offender was recruited specifically to ensure gender balance, although all PSNs may work with any child who came to the office.

Activities

The overarching vision of providing opportunities to children to use their lived experience to support other children has been delivered in a range of ways, including one-to-one support, peer led group-work and the participation of children in 'co-production platforms'. One to one support (provided by PSNs) may take the form of informal conversations (within or outside of the YJS premises), introductions to sporting or artistic programmes or organisations, support with finding paid work, support with finding and taking up education or training opportunities, referral to/liaison with YJS practitioners and services and so on. Children can also participate in peer led PSHE workshops and 'peer conversation hubs'. These are centred around emotional wellbeing and mental health issues and are designed as spaces in which children can talk about their lives and experiences with others who have been or are going through the youth justice system as well as work on developing their PSHE skills in practical ways. In co-production work, children on the project have worked with the Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board, local judges and magistrates, the youth justice service and other local organisations on areas such as unconscious bias in the youth justice system, cannabis use and the experience of being in custody or in court from the perspective of children.

Within the YJS, the charity's staff attend YJS management team meetings and are consulted/provide advice to other YJS officers on things like new forms of intervention, individual cases and community matters. In addition, the PSNs support projects run within the YJS by practitioners or partner organisations and in the local community. This has included a drama group ran at the YJS, a knife awareness programme ran in local secondary

schools, residential programmes ran by the YJS (in holiday periods) and a third sector project raising awareness amongst parents regarding issues such as grooming, child criminal exploitation and county lines.

An Implicit 'Theory of Change'

In outlining what we call a 'theory of change' underpinning the project's work, we are not referring to anything specific the project has devised, but rather to the implicit thinking behind its work. The long-term goals of the project extend beyond the prevention of offending by children. It seeks to enrich their lives and provide them with the opportunity to develop skills, grow their self-confidence, and to lead a fulfilling life. It is led by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), who had a vision of working with children to reduce the level of reoffending, He worked with a senior officer in the YJS to begin to establish this. The long-term goals were thus to develop a service that would use children, who had matured and were capable of supporting children without being compromised in this endeavour. They needed to understand the responsibilities that the YJS would have of them when they were working unsupervised with the children. In the event, the first peer navigators were individuals who had been supported by the CEO and had matured and changed. This satisfied the first two above conditions, as the project became embedded, with the support of the management and then staff. The interventions were designed to be different, but complementary, to the work of practitioners and included initially career advice and general support. From this a programme of group support that was voluntary to attend grew, and the opportunity to speak to decision makers about their experiences. All of these were designed to enhance the confidence and skills of the children.

At the core of the charity's work is the simple idea that children with recent, lived experience of the youth justice system are well placed because of that experience to support children currently experiencing the same system, as well as to advise policy makers and service providers on areas they feel could be improved. As we have noted, YJS practitioners said that the PSNs appeared better able, especially in the early stages, to talk to and have talk to them, some children referred to the YJS, whilst interviewees from external organisations spoke of the power of authenticity and of the audience's appreciation of the PSNs' openness and honesty. Lived experience was said to bestow a Heineken -like quality, with a reach beyond that of those without it:

> "If I look at my own lived experience, I can have a police officer … coming in talking to me about drink and drive and alcohol or weapons or county lines and, you know, it's still a police officer, you know and you are, you sit there you go okay, all right, thank you and you kind of disappear. When it's somebody who's similar to you, somebody who talks like you, dresses similar, not just the experience of criminal justice or prison, but has grown up in similar environments, you know similar background, may come from single parent family, little bit of poverty may be involved, there's educational needs all of that and you put all of that in the mix, It makes it real to say that's a real person, you know, a real person has been through it, they're feeling it." (Charity CEO)

The differences between YJS practitioners and PSNs were frequently cited as an important dimension of the charity's offer:

> "It's a more accessible practitioner group I think, for some of our young people, because of the peer navigators, because of their lived experience, but because of course, even before you know about their lived experiences, because of their age, their gender, some in some cases their race, which I think is just a more comfortable set of people to be talking to for a young person who's quite anxious about talking to professional, who they might have had difficult experiences of." (YJS Practitioner)

> "I tell young people sometimes that I never had a me that sat down with me and said you know bro I have been out there where you are now. I never had that…if I had had a me, I might have stopped a lot earlier and do things that focused me a lot more in school." (PSN)

Linked to this is a recognition that for any children but especially for those with such 'adverse childhood experiences', engaging with criminal justice agencies and staff is unlikely to be easy or viewed as desirable. In this context, the charity serves as an intermediary between children and the more formal and potentially threatening or mysterious aspects of the youth justice process.

> "I think it's difficult for any young person to come into a youth offending team. Not knowing what you're expecting. … So it's good for them to have other people that they once they feel comfortable with … because some of the (charity's staff) will maybe have been through similar stuff, or just giving them a platform for having a chat about it without having to be the case manager where you think you got to be careful what you say…" (YJS Practitioner)

> "I think if I've had young people before, who maybe have been struggling with their mental health, and have been reluctant to engage in mental health support from CAMHS, I will consider a referral to (the charity), because they can make the young people, I think, consider or maybe even just explore the area of trauma, and I think sometimes they feel a bit more comfortable to do that from someone that's maybe a little bit more relatable to them, so that maybe they know from the area or someone that maybe has been in a custodial establishment, or someone, maybe that's come through the YOS for similar offenses to them." (YJS Practitioner)

At the same time the lessons of lived experience shape the activities provided: safe spaces to listen and talk, education, training and job opportunities, workshops on issues affecting children and the chance to speak truth to power. Such activities are informed by an awareness of issues such as fear, trauma and mistrust, well known barriers to effective engagement (Barry, 2010). Likewise, the focus on developing PSHE skills and education derives from both the lived experiences of the charity's CEO and PSNs regarding the obstacles they had faced growing up and the extensive evidence from research regarding the over-representation amongst children in trouble of those with problematic family relationships, negative educational experiences and outcomes, relatively poor mental health

and with language and communication difficulties (Gray et al., 2021; Liddle et al, 2016; Newman et al, 2012).

Benefits

For children attending the project, three distinct if overlapping positive outcomes were identified. First, they were perceived as more likely to engage in other YJS interventions intended to meet their needs:

> "There was one young person I was working with, who was kind of willing to talk to me but a little bit ambivalent about whether I could help … And I think, I think having the peer navigators involved with him did help a little bit for him to see that, well, when they talked to me it was like, this is a colleague, you know, this is somebody who we trust and can work with and so I think that probably did help him to then be in a room with me on his own, thinking, actually maybe this person's safe." (YJS Practitioner)

Second is the development of personal, health, social and educational skills and knowledge and entry into education training or employment. Above and again below interviewees described how the PSN's involvement had led in turn to their successful engagement in longer term activities:

> "There's a male that I'm currently working with who, he was, sort of getting into repeated trouble, and repeated arrests for sort of an acquisitive type of … and he was he sort of came to me distressed one day and was like I feel like I want to stop doing it, but I don't know how to stop doing it after all …. And they actually secured him a sort of like a trial employment position at a warehouse that we have next to our building … and he's working there now, that was in November and he's really sort of turned a corner and was glad that he'd been given an opportunity and you can sort of really see a shift in his thinking, so I think that that was some real practical support." (YJS Practitioner)

Thirdly, underpinning and alongside notable, longer-term achievements like training courses and degrees completed and jobs secured, a range of softer outcomes were identified including improved emotional and mental health and greater self-confidence.

> "I know for a fact that (the charity) have supported a lot of young people with the clinical practitioners' work, like the counselling and the input from them, and supported young people through that from a stage where, you know I know a couple of them have been quite suicidal to be able to then recognize, you know what, I can do this in my life and I don't need to go that way. So, you know, give them the positiveness and a sense of self-worth. So, for me, those kind of things are unmeasurable. But you know it changes young people's lives really." (Youth Justice Practitioner)

Linked to this, some participants were also perceived as having benefited in terms of their relationships with peers:

> "Another female that I managed…, she's quite a complex young person, she's quite hard to reach and she has a lot going on and experienced a lot, and she sort of really enjoyed (it). So it gave her sort of the opportunity to sort of like meet with the young people in a safe space. She's quite vulnerable as well, so it was good that it was in a safe space…. So yeah, I think it's helping giving people sort of a shift in their identity, if you like, in terms of a more pro-social pro-social identity, and things that they can sort of strive and achieve for." (YJS Practitioner)

Such language is reminiscent of the kind of redemption script described by Maruna (2001) and the discussion of outcomes with PSNs especially echoed tenets of desistance theory (McNeill, 2006):

> "I would never have gone to Central London properly and sat in buildings with people in suits and so for me it was like wow, actually there is a way in for me to making a change. So, for me it made so much sense to drop what I was doing and continue on with this and I have just continued progressing and elevating literally." (PSN)

> "If I wasn't with (the project), I will be honest, I probably would have gone back to straight what I was doing, either getting into trouble again or worse hurt someone or been hurt myself." (PSN)

The project afforded them agency and facilitated or enabled personal change:

> "For me it was a place to make mistakes and like gain advice and so through that, I always had a problem with getting told off and getting told what I do is wrong and I never used to listen to people giving me any sort of criticism, constructive or nor, so having that space to like be late or miss a deadline and instead of having a teacher shouting at me…or giving me a detention for not doing anything but just having a conversation like it's about me." (PSN)

Within the YJS, higher levels of engagement/participation were said to translate into greater levels of compliance with statutory orders, lower breach rates and, potentially, lower reoffending rates:

> "Okay for the YJS greater compliance for our young people at all levels of their intervention, whether it's core orders or pre-court orders. Quicker compliance as well, you know, it's all very well, children coming into the YJS but if they're not saying anything, it's not, so, quicker engagement… Certainly, our breach levels are really low, because, you know, most young people do actually cooperate with us, because that facilitation process works so well." YJS Manager)

> "it would be good to know, probably quite possible to measure, the outcomes in terms of reoffending because we are there as a service to reduce re offending. That is our main thing. And as a service within that, we are also evaluated on that, partly on that, as well. How many of the young person we work with go on to reoffend and and how many don't.". (YJS Practitioner)

Many interviewees felt that the YJS had benefited in more general terms, emphasising the importance of the charity's co-location and duration:

> "I think for me, it's been a really positive impact on the youth offending service, because I think you know we've got an in-house service that we can kind of go to any time… They're in the building. They know a lot of the young people, it is the first point of contact, sometimes, with them…. Yeah, and it's been in a while. it's been priceless, to be honest you know." (YJS Practitioner)

Prior to the pandemic, one of the authors had the opportunity to observe the sort of day-to-day interactions between the PSNs and children noted above. The PSNs would greet service users as they entered the building, explaining who they were and what they did. The Youth Justice office has double doors with a small isolation lobby area between them, necessary for health and safety reasons, but somewhat intimidating on arrival. The PSNs have their own room where they can take service users and they have the free run of the building. This has given them the confidence to be part of, whilst being apart from, the formal element of the service.

In its outward facing work, the charity was said to promote voices that otherwise struggle to be heard, given the relative powerlessness of children who offend. The impact of being able to communicate their lived experience was felt to have been profound:

> They've been into communities where they're able to you know put their views forward. They've been in meetings where they're able to challenge professionals. You don't get that anywhere, I mean, very rarely do you get that, you know." (YJS Practitioner)

> "So. I mean I love my work with them. I really enjoy it. I learn a lot from them. quite honestly. They teach me a lot… There's not very many people in their lives who can say that they've, you know, made a difference to youth justice". (External Organisation Representative)

Challenges

Although interviewees were without exception positive about the work and impact of the charity, its work is perceived as risky, given that issues of confidentiality, safeguarding and vulnerability inevitably arise. The charity's CEO and staff as well as YJS practitioners and managers were upfront about the need to assess and manage potential risks to and from the children they work with. An initial risk assessment takes place with children and meetings are held with them and their parent(s)/guardian(s) to explain the aims of the project as well as to agree whether one to one support and/or group activities are most appropriate. Notwithstanding the primary focus on the future, it is more or less assumed that children will acknowledge and take responsibility for offences they have committed in the past. Relatedly, the PSNs emphasised the need to remind children of their duty to disclose concerns they may have about future offending or similar:

> "we make it very clear to the young people, don't incriminate yourselves or make it any worse for yourself. If there is something you need advice or help we are always

> going to tell you to take the right path but solely the decision is with yourself but if you are going to tell me, I took my knife out yesterday and went to bore up a youth I am going to tell your YJS officer." (PSN)

More broadly, interviewees were open about the fact that the charity was not unequivocally supported by all management or staff, in part due to concerns about risk, but also because of what might be termed professional rivalries regarding who was best qualified to work with children and how that work is 'managed':

> "what we haven't got with the (the charity's) staff is trained professionals, and therefore the work that they do has to be slightly different. So there are some people who think that's not really a big problem, and the other people think it is a big problem." (YJS Manager)

There are echoes here of Nixon's (2019: 58) finding, from research undertaken in a probation context, that peer mentors "received 'mixed messages' from other colleagues" as a result of their ex-offender status. However, the tension we observed seemed to relate more to what should be the primary focus of the charity and the PSNs' work rather than a problem accepting them as equals in the workplace.

> "I used to see it in my mind as a way of helping young people access the interventions that are available. But I think now it's moved, to actually the interventions happening in the room with peer navigators, in which, in which case we need to know what those are, and how they fit with the plan that the young person has in the wider service, because it needs to be integrated in because we don't want to be trying to have the same conversation." (YJS Practitioner)

As intimated here, there was ~~also~~ a sense that over time the charity's own diversionary activities had grown in significance, whilst work fostering engagement in or with other YJS interventions had diminished. Additionally, it was felt that at times communication between the charity and YJS staff could be improved upon. Underpinning such comments did seem to be some anxiety over the potential for a conflict of interests with one YJS practitioner observing, for example, that it was important that they were not seen by children as this "separate and slightly preferable entity in the building" rather than as colleagues working towards the same goals.

A further set of issues relate to the sustainability of the project and how far the model was transferable. On the one hand, there was a strong feeling that the basic idea of involving children with lived experience in diversionary activities could and should be rolled out across youth justice services. At the same time, it was recognised that this particular project, driven by a charismatic and passionate CEO who is very close to practice and backed by management in one specific setting, had developed organically, according to local conditions, and so might not be appropriate or practicable elsewhere.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many researchers and practitioners, we suspect, will recognise Creaney's (2020) finding that children subject to youth justice interventions may engage in passive compliance or 'game-

playing', going along with but not truly engaged in the process or the activities provided. Accordingly, "(a)pproaches that foster empathy, trust and children's participation can help to promote positive outcomes, including enhanced self-esteem and self-worth, and lead to reductions in (re) offending (Creaney and Smith, 2020)" (ibid: 105, citation in original). The project described here offers one such approach and the research findings provide evidence of precisely these kinds of outcomes. In particular, they suggest that involving those with lived experience may be particularly helpful in breaking down barriers and building up trust, widely viewed as necessary pre-requisites for meaningful engagement. One strength of the project is that such engagement can take very different forms. It could mean participation in PSHE-focused workshops ran by PSNs or in work with policy making bodies in which they are invited draw on their own lived experiences in efforts to improve aspects of the youth justice system, or it could simply mean they are more likely to turn up to appointments required by their order. Regardless, the 'lived experience' element appears to act as a bridge between worlds or as a lubricant or active ingredient that helps to defuse tensions and create mutual understanding.

Importantly, the charity's independence from statutory rules, which enables it, for example, to employ children who may still be serving sentences as PSNs, something the YJS could not do, is a significant advantage. Moreover, the charity emphasises that its offer of support and opportunities to children extends indefinitely – they can come back anytime – again distinguishing its service from what YJS staff can say or do. More than practicalities are at stake here. What is being said is that the charity will treat them differently, it will stick with them as it were through 'thick and thin' because lived experience tells them that, given the right chances, they have the power to achieve whatever they want. Implicitly at least, there is recognition here of the youth justice system's limitations, a critique of its potential to do more than criminalise and a claim, perhaps, to care more.

For these reasons, we argue that the label '*child first* diversion' is appropriate to describe this form of practice. It is based upon needs as much as risk-assessments, does not deny the consequences of offending but does not dwell on them either. PSNs are 'living proof' (Creaney, 2020) that an offending history need not define you as a person, indeed that it can even be an asset in certain circumstances, used to help others and mitigate the harms of an inherently stigmatising criminal justice system.

The case study offers some support for Smith's (2021) argument that for diversionary activities to be transformative, they need to be institutionally independent from the youth justice system, unconstrained by its ultimately punitive and criminalising logic. Against this and unsurprisingly, given its 'debt' to the youth justice service which has funded it and provided its 'home', there was relatively little evidence of such constraint in this example of practice and much talk instead of the benefits of partnership working. It is possible to envisage the charity as part of a children's rights service working alongside rather than within a youth justice service, but there were no calls for such a change voiced here. On the contrary, the need for children to acknowledge and take responsibility for their behaviour and actions was seen as a precondition for them joining the project, so in this sense the goal of preventing and reducing offending is shared and viewed as relatively unproblematic. For

the time being at least, a more tolerant, more aware, more sensitive, more helpful and more effective youth justice system is what 'lived experience' suggests is needed, not as some (Case and Haines 2021) have suggested, its abolition.

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[i] Haines and Drakeford (1998) urged youth justice workers to adopt a 'children first' philosophy that prioritised keeping children out of the criminal justice system and above all out of custody, arguing that this was the "best way of ensuring that these individuals do not grow up to be prolific and dangerous offenders" (ibid: xiii).