

Young Futures

Policy Briefing

Dr Alex Chard

Last year Keir and I met with a grieving mum in Hartlepool who showed us the video she kept on her phone of her cradling her teenage son in his hospital bed, singing to him as he lay dying from a knife wound. It was one of the hardest things I have done in this job. Families who feel like they have lost their future. But who are calling for us to help them save other children's lives. Knife crime has gone up by 70% in eight years – some of the steepest increases in towns and suburbs.

Yvette Cooper - Speech to Labour Conference 2023

Introduction

When Yvette Cooper, then Shadow Home Secretary, gave the speech referenced above to the Labour Party Conference, she proposed a Young Futures programme. Commitment to the programme was then reiterated by Sir Keir Starmer in January 2024 when he stated that if elected the party would introduce Young Futures, a £100m a year Sure Start programme for teenagers. When Labour was elected in July 2024, Yvette Cooper was appointed as the Home Secretary. Legislation announced in the King's Speech demonstrated the intention by the new government to take forward the Young Futures programme.

The programme is a key part of the Labour Party manifesto commitment to halve knife crime and youth violence in a decade. In her speech to Labour Conference, Yvette Cooper re-stated promises of the Blair government (she was a cabinet member), to be *tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime*. This is reflected in a Labour briefing on her conference speech that included:

Young Futures, a new cross-government national programme aimed at giving Britain's young people the best start in life, with a specific strand of activity targeted at those young people at most risk of being drawn into violent crime and delivering support for young people struggling with their mental health.

And for those who repeatedly cause trouble in their community or are found carrying knives, there also need to be stronger interventions and clear consequences to stop their behaviour escalating and to keep other young people safe.

In September *The Times* newspaper reported the Home Secretary had said that *new figures reveal police are receiving more reports of rape from 14-year-old girls than any other age group*. It was also reported that in the year to March, figures showed that *nearly a third of victims [of rape] reported to the police, involved girls aged 18 and under*. Outlining a wide range of intended government measures to reduce violence against women and girls it was also reported that:

Labour said it would also attempt to change boys' attitudes towards women through its plans to set up a network of Young Futures hubs. Backed by £100 million a year, the hubs will provide targeted programmes in every area to identify the young people most at risk of being drawn into violent crime, including sexual crime and build a package of support that responds to the challenges they face, including mental health problems.

This announcement linked Young Futures with another Labour Party manifesto commitment, to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade.

Linking of the programme with the previous Labour governments phrase, *tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime* is of concern. When the last

This briefing reviews the information currently available on Young Futures and begins to consider the significant implications for public services. The author of the briefing is Dr Alex Chard, Director of YCTCS Ltd, a systemic consultancy practice working strategically in a range of public services. Email: alex@systemicpractice.com

Labour government applied this approach, the numbers of children entering the justice system and in custody increased very significantly.

The Young Futures Programme originated in the report *Hidden in Plain Sight* from the Commission on Young Lives; chaired by Anne Longfield, former Children's Commissioner for England. The proposals made were for a *Sure Start for Teenagers*.

Whilst the initial focus of Young Futures is on reducing knife crime, the government's ambition for the programme is clearly much broader, including having now been linked with reducing sexual violence against girls. Potentially Young Futures also encompasses fundamental changes in the delivery of services for older children, including within education, health and social care and youth justice.

The King's Speech

Following election of the Labour government, the King's Speech to Parliament in July included a Crime and Policing Bill intended to:

Tackle knife crime. Get dangerous knives and other weapons off our streets by banning ninja swords and other lethal blades, and introducing strict sanctions on senior executives of online companies who fail to operate within the law. Prevent young people being drawn into crime and criminal gangs by strengthening the law to tackle those who exploit children for criminal purposes, and create arrangements for local Young Futures prevention partnerships to bring together services to support at-risk teenagers.

This showed the new government's intent to follow through on proposals regarding Young Futures. Placing the partnership arrangements on a statutory basis indicates the significance of Young Futures in government policy. The Guardian (8th July 2024), reported that *Labour will also pass a new law making it mandatory for those under 18 caught with a knife to be assessed by a youth offending team. ... Drug dealers who exploit children will face punishment under a new law as part of a crackdown on crime planned by the new Labour government.*

Young Futures also needs to be viewed in the context of the Children's Wellbeing Bill also announced in

the King's Speech. This *will ensure our education and social care systems transform life chances for millions of children and young people in England.* The Briefing from the Prime Minister's Office outlining that the aims of the intended legislation included:

- Keeping children safe, happy and rooted in their communities and schools by strengthening multi-agency child protection and safeguarding.
- Creating a duty on local authorities to have and maintain Children Not in School registers, and provide support to home-educating parents.

Children and Young People Now (July 2024), also reported that the Children's Wellbeing Bill would include a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation. Outlined below, is that the proposed local partnerships to deliver Young Futures will be expected draw upon new powers to protect older children from harm. These seem likely to be included in the Children's Wellbeing Bill.

Broad Proposals

Since Labour came to power, detailed proposals for the development of the Young Futures programme have not been published. However, the following drawn from a Labour Party briefing on a new 'tough love' youth programme outlined in Yvette Cooper's speech at the Labour Party Conference in 2023 provides the broad policy context:

... a range of devastating statistics showing worsening outcomes for young people, including a record number of children and young people seeking mental health support from the NHS, analysis from the think tank Crest suggesting over 200,000 children are vulnerable to serious violence, a record number of children as victims of crime in 2021/2022, and last year seeing the highest number of people killed with a knife for over 70 years, with the biggest increase amongst young boys aged 16-17.

We need urgent interventions to stop young people getting drawn into crime or exploitation in the first place. For too long, teenagers have been pushed from pillar to post between local authorities, mental health services, the police and youth offending teams. That's why we are setting up a cross-Government 'tough love' initiative, with new youth

hubs and proper local plans to identify those most at risk and help them access the support they need.

The briefing proposed up to £100m a year, based on combining existing commitments. Funding new youth mentors and mental health hubs in every community, youth workers in pupil referral units and A&E, to target young people starting to be drawn into violence. Alongside a programme of public sector reform to deliver:

- A targeted programme in every area to identify the young people most at risk of being drawn into violent crime and build a package of support that responds to the challenges they are facing. This will be achieved through bringing together services at a local level to better coordinate delivery of preventative interventions around the young person, rooted in a strong evidence base.
- A national network of Young Futures hubs to bring local services together, deliver support for teenagers at risk of being drawn into crime or facing mental health challenges and, where appropriate, deliver universal youth provision.
- Ensure existing enforcement measures are effectively utilised, including family interventions, the use of curfews, enforcement of penalties, drug and alcohol interventions, community work, and stronger action against the criminal gangs that are drawing young people into crime.

Whilst the above reflects the immediate priority to tackle knife crime, the intended scope and impact of the Young Futures programme can be seen as being much broader:

- The programme will be a major reform to focus on prevention rather than just sticking plaster policies, and will mean government departments, schools and local services working together so that services operate around young people and their families rather than in separate silos.
- The initial focus of the programme will be knife crime but once the programme is demonstrating results, Labour will look to expand the remit beyond youth violence and into other mission objectives such as educational attainment.

- Local partnerships will draw together mainstream services with the work of Violence Reduction Units and voluntary sector organisations and will help deliver Labour's mission to halve knife crime in the country within the next decade.
- The programme being developed with local government leaders, experts, and young people themselves.
- Local partnerships will be measured against a national outcomes framework to allow for local innovation in delivery.

A *Policy Mogul* report drawn from the 2023 Labour Party conference provides further notes that indicate the transformational nature of the programme for both national policy and local service delivery, outlining Labour's intent to:

- Set up a new cross-government initiative to oversee Young Futures, bringing together all relevant departments to set objectives, oversee delivery, and assess outcomes.
- Labour will work with local authorities to establish new Young Futures Partnerships to properly coordinate and better integrate existing services for teenagers in their area. This is a reform exercise to better coordinate existing services around children and young people lives.
- The Young Futures Partnerships will include police, local government (youth services, social services & community safety officers), CAMHs, local schools, YOTs, and the voluntary sector.
- Where VRUs exist at a police force level, these will be given responsibilities to oversee and work with the local partnership teams.
- Work of partnerships will need to be clearly focused, evidence based and informed by the work of the Youth Endowment Fund. This will be closely monitored by central government.

Responsibilities on the partnerships would include:

- Mapping provision of existing services for teenagers in the area (both universal access and targeted services) and the opportunities for better cooperation and coordination.

- Establishing data and systems for identifying or mapping children and young people most at risk of being drawn into violence, exploitation, crime and antisocial behaviour.
- Drawing up Child Community Safety Plans. These are analogous to existing Child Protection Plans but focused on identifying children most at risk of harm outside the home, ensuring social services, police and schools co-ordinate child protection interventions.
- Establishing a referral framework for children at risk into local support and services, so local services, families and young people themselves can refer themselves for support.

It was further reported that:

We will also take a tougher approach to children that have slipped into criminal offences by requiring partnerships to ensure they receive appropriate interventions much earlier on to divert them away from more serious wrongdoing – including rolling out Focussed Deterrence approaches which combine mental health and employment support and diversionary activities with stronger enforcement and intervention requirements where young people breach the conditions.

Further Announcements

Announcements in *The Guardian* in August began to indicate how government would progress Young Futures. Two linked articles both relied on a visit by Yvette Cooper to a youth centre in Manchester and included meetings she had with young people.

The visit was made just two weeks after the tragedy in Southport where three young girls attending a dance class were killed in a horrific knife attack. A 17-year-old boy was charged with their murder and the harming of 10 others. The *Guardian* reporting that, *Cooper highlighted the young lives lost to crime, and the government's commitment in particular to halving violence against women and girls.*

These *Guardian* reports usefully provided further details and insights on the thinking behind the Young Futures programme and how it is being progressed. In the first article, comments made by the Home

Secretary to the young people spoken with included:

A lot of the things that the Conservative government did were deeply damaging,

Some of it is they turned their backs on young people. Part of the reason I wanted to do the young futures programme is because I think, to be honest, your generation has been abandoned and let down ... I totally understand the loss of trust.

Pressed later on whether there would be funding for more youth services and activities such as the air cadets, Cooper said she had to be "honest that money is tight right now". "We've managed to identify some funds for the young futures programme to identify what more we could do. But we know funding decisions are going to be difficult."

In the second article it was further reported that:

- *After the deaths of young people in stabbings in Nottingham, Wolverhampton and Croydon, Cooper told the Guardian she was initiating a new cross-government "young futures" unit to be based in the Home Office, as part of the ambition to halve violent crime in a decade.*
- *As part of the push, the home secretary will tell councils and police forces they have until Christmas to put proposals in place to tackle crime among young people.*
- *New Home Office guidelines to be in force by the end of the year will set out how networks of police, mental health professionals, local schools, youth offending teams and charities can work together to help steer teenagers away from crime.*

In the September report in *The Times* newspaper (also referenced above) it was reported that in relation to violence against women and girls Yvette Cooper would be saying that:

If we're seeing this as a ten-year mission we have to make sure that the girls and boys who are starting primary school at the moment are not being let down in the same way in ten years time and that's why this has to be a mission really for the whole of government.

On my watch, if you hurt and abuse women, the police will be after you. The era of impunity is over.

I want police officers to use every tool in their arsenal. And to strain every sinew to keep women safe.

Conclusions

Announcements by the Home Secretary outlined above, include that a new cross-government Young Futures unit will be based in the Home Office. Given the high profile of knife crime and the manifesto commitment to halve youth crime and violence towards women and girls within a decade, it seems likely that the unit being established to oversee Young Futures will become part of the driving mechanism to deliver on the manifesto commitment on knife crime and violence against girls. References to partnerships being measured against a national outcomes framework strongly suggest that meeting manifesto commitments will (at least in part) be achieved by performance managing local Young Futures partnerships and agencies to collectively deliver on the Young Futures programme.

Whilst the initial focus of the Young Futures programme was originally stated as reducing knife crime, the programme is also being promoted as introducing much broader public sector reform across a very wide range of services. Proposed responsibilities on partnerships for mapping provision and considering opportunities for better cooperation and coordination indicate significant re-configuration of services will be needed to meet government expectations and targets.

This is further reflected in the commitment in the King's Speech to put the Young Futures partnership arrangements on a statutory basis. The Young Futures programme also needs to be viewed within the context of legislation to strengthen multi-agency child protection and safeguarding arrangements and that Young Futures partnerships should draw up Child Community Safety Plans.

Taken together, proposals in the Crime and Policing and the Children's Wellbeing Bill indicate a clear intent by the new government to improve the lives and life chances of children and young people.

However, they also signal that significant transformation of public services are needed in order to achieve these objectives. Given recent economic

announcements, particular uncertainty must lie in how the Labour government will fund the radical overhaul of public services for children that is clearly being proposed. With that ambition in mind and the very high human and financial cost of harm to children and their families, £100m seems like a very small sum for a very challenging set of tasks.

Clearly there is much that is still to be determined by government in relation to Young Futures. Just some of the strategic issues and questions that remain include:

- Where statutory Young Futures Partnerships will be located and be differentiated, amongst the already crowded landscape of statutory partnerships, including for health, social care, child safeguarding and criminal justice.
- Young Futures is clearly focussed on prevention services but also on strengthening deterrence and enforcement. How prevention and deterrence will be balanced is unclear, including how the interface of a range of legislation and local agencies in the lives of children will be managed.
- National leadership of Young Futures will be in the Home Office, however it is explicitly recognised that Young Futures needs cross-government working, how this will be achieved has not been announced.
- Within the sources above, there has been no direct reference to the role of the Youth Justice Board and very limited reference to Youth Offending Teams. Their roles in Young Futures needs to be clearly identified by government.
- Given the need for cross-government working and local inter-agency collaboration it seems likely that guidance on Young Futures will need to be joint government department guidance and applicable to all local agencies. It will be important for government to ensure this interfaces with other statutory guidance, particularly Working Together to Safeguard Children.

The Young Futures programme is a much needed and potentially very exciting development in addressing the needs of older children, including preventing and responding to very serious violence from and against older children. The indications that it is intended to

begin to create much greater realignment, cohesion and focus of services to adolescents is also very welcome and much needed.

However, what is concerning is that the programme is being linked to the previous Labour governments phrase, *Tough on Crime and Tough on the Causes of Crime*. When the last Labour government used this expression, it was not just tough for many children but also had very tragic outcomes. Very many children becoming enmeshed in the justice system. With the numbers of children entering the justice system and incarcerated in custodial settings rising very significantly.

The numbers of children in the justice system and in custody have in the last few years fallen to historically low levels. However in the last year numbers have begun to rise. Perhaps the most significant risk of the Young Futures programme is that this programme once again widens the net of the criminal justice system. With inappropriate use of orders and enforcement leading to rapid increases in children in the justice system and in custody.

The success of Young Futures needs be judged not only on whether it reduces child violence but also whether it develops humane and non-punitive approaches to children who are both victims and perpetrators of serious violence. Young Futures also needs to be judged on whether it addresses being tough on the causes of crime including serious violence.

There is strong evidence that serious youth violence is closely correlated with povertisation and racialisation of both children and their families and communities. These are systemic issues that have sadly become very deeply embedded in the lives and experiences of many communities. Reducing child violence is intrinsically linked to how both national and local government address these complex systemic challenges.

Established in 2001 Developed from a Partnership Created in 1991

Overview

YCTCS Ltd provides specialist consultancy and service development within children's services, education, youth justice services and regional authorities. The company focus is on strategic service development, research, safeguarding and risk reduction.

We have extensive experience in working within highly complex environments, helping organisations to develop and achieve high quality outcomes for service users. Our services are available throughout the UK. Services include:

- **Strategic Service Development.** We assist senior leadership groups with strategic planning this includes preparing and responding to inspections. We have provided advice to regional bodies on the reform of youth justice services.
- **Leadership Development.** We have significant experience of working with leadership groups and management teams where dynamics are impeding effective working. We developed a masters level module in systemic practice for social work managers. We also provide coaching and mentoring.
- **Statutory Boards.** We assist statutory boards to review their function and role. This includes safeguarding partnerships, children's partnership boards and youth justice service (YJS) boards. We chaired a merger board between two youth justice services.
- **Safeguarding and Risk Reduction.** An area of specialist professional knowledge is in safeguarding older children and in developing services to reduce risks to them or others. We have undertaken a range of case reviews of children involved in serious violence including a thematic review of six children involved in grave crimes.
- **Research.** We have completed research into the extent of abuse and loss for eighty children known to YJSs in the West Midlands region, this led to the report *Punishing Abuse*.
- **Inspection.** We have worked with over 50 services on improvement before or after inspection. This has

included youth offending team inspections, social care inspections, LSCB reviews and local authority services related to school improvement.

- **Procedures and Guidance.** We are highly experienced in developing professional guidance documents. We have developed a range of procedures for specialist service areas including procedures for YOTs and Liaison and Diversion projects. In 2013 we developed the SWAPP Reference Document, the LGA describing it as a source of research and advice on frontline social work practice.

Our model of work is academically informed including systemic practice approaches. Development of organisational learning is an area of specialist knowledge. Our extensive experience of direct service provision also means we remain firmly rooted in the realities of practice.

Company Director Dr Alex Chard has a Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice. He is a member of the Institute of Directors and the Society of Authors. He has contributed to the development and teaching of masters and doctoral programmes in systemic approaches. His published work includes:

- ***Punishing Abuse*** a study of eighty children known to YJSs and other services in the West Midlands;
- ***Systemic Resilience***, HMI Probation academic insights summarises thinking on how practitioners can help build resilience around children;
- Joint editor and contributing author, ***Systemic Inquiry; Innovations in Reflexive Practice Research***, EIC Press;
- Co-author of a chapter in ***Children's Services at the Crossroads***. The chapter ***Managerialism, at the Tipping Point*** was cited in the Munro review.
- Co-author of three editions of ***Defending Young People*** a criminal law text book.

He has recently co-authored a nationally significant report on regional responses to trauma and the building of systemic resilience within communities. This is awaiting publication.