

Cumbria children and young person custody project

Cumbria Constabulary, in partnership with the Youth Justice Service, have designed and implemented a child-centred and trauma-informed approach for children in custody including designated cells, engagement rooms and aides to assist regulation.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Custody Diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) Training and professional development
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Region	North West
Partners	Criminal justice (includes prisons, probation services)
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	May 2025
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people Offenders

Aim

The children and young person custody project aims to establish a standardised, trauma-informed approach for managing children and young people (CYP) in custody across Cumbria.

The initiative reflects a commitment to safeguarding vulnerable children and ensuring that custody environments are psychologically informed, child-focused and conducive to positive engagement.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the project include:

- ensuring CYP remain regulated and calm during their time in custody
- increasing engagement and cooperation with CYP
- reduced incidents of assault on staff by CYP detainees
- reduced self-harm by CYP detainees
- improved outcomes for victims
- strengthened relationships between CYP, the police, and the wider criminal justice system

Description

The children and young person custody project has been developed by the child-centred policing team at Cumbria Constabulary in collaboration with:

- Cumberland youth justice service (YJS)
- Westmorland and Furness youth justice service

- youth substance awareness for everyone (SAFE) team

The initiative began with a training module designed to focus on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and childhood trauma for newly recruited student officers. This training includes different types of trauma, what are ACE's, how trauma can affect brain development, neurobiology of threat, memory and triggers, window of tolerance, neurodiversity/trauma overlap, shame and understand behaviours which may present as a result of trauma. This foundational work led to a broader review of custody suites across the force, revealing that existing environments were not sufficiently child-friendly or trauma-informed.

Data from Cumberland YJS (February 2025) highlighted the urgency of this work, as:

- 74% of children open to the service had experienced trauma
- 27% had a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- 15% had a diagnosis of autism

Early findings underscored the importance of recognising that CYP entering police custody are, first and foremost, children and must be treated accordingly. Many have experienced significant trauma, which may manifest in complex or challenging behaviours, sometimes leading to arrest. A negative custody experience risks compounding existing trauma and can adversely affect both the individual and the wider criminal justice process.

Creating a calm and regulated environment can enhance cooperation and investigative outcomes. This includes ensuring time outside the cell, meaningful engagement with appropriate adults, and the provision of age-appropriate distraction items and information.

Feedback was proactively gathered from children and young people currently engaged with YJS, as well as from youth groups supported by Cumberland Council. Their perspectives on custody experiences played a vital role in informing the development of the project.

YJS staff collaborated with the young people to co-design feature wall artwork for the police custody cells. Additionally, research was conducted into best practice from other police forces across the UK who had successfully implemented child-first approaches in custody settings which yielded positive outcomes.

The children and young person custody project is currently operational in Carlisle, Barrow, Workington and Kendal custody suites. The project introduces a range of trauma-informed and neurodiversity-sensitive measures, including the following:

- Two CYP custody cells in each suite, decorated in designs based on local landmarks and painted in neurodivergent-friendly colours. These spaces are intended to support emotional regulation for individuals with trauma or neurodevelopmental conditions. Chalkboards have been installed to explain custody processes and/or to use as a creative outlet. Any signage that could potentially be triggering has been removed.
- Distraction and sensory items placed in cells to support regulation and engagement. These include fidget toys, fact books, therapeutic squash balls, disposable eye masks and ear defenders.
- Designated CYP interview and engagement rooms thoughtfully redesigned to provide a more welcoming, child-focused environment. Each space has been decorated with soft furnishings, such as beanbags, to help facilitate positive interactions during interviews and engagement.
- Updated custody procedures, such as: an animation video shown on a tablet, explaining to CYP what to expect during their time in police custody, a custody shutdown protocol for CYP bookings and movements, minimising exposure to adult detainees and prioritisation of child-friendly bail times to reduce schooltime bail answers.
- Liaison and diversion service engagement is prioritised in CYP cases, to clarify medical history and to identify any needs relating to neurodivergence.
- New CYP custody leaflets, including: a booking-in leaflet, which explains the custody process and introduces key personnel and an exit leaflet, which outlines the disposal decision, provides signposting to support services and includes a QR code for feedback.
- Engagement with appropriate adults who can engage with CYP in the designated engagement room while the investigation is progressed.
- Training for all custody staff on ACEs and childhood trauma is delivered either in person or through pre-recorded sessions, complementing the training provided for new student officers. In addition, local defence solicitors are also offered training on ACEs, trauma-informed practice and out-of-court resolutions.

The Barrow custody suite will feature a dedicated booking-in and booking-out desk specifically for children and young people, further enhancing the child-first approach.

Overall impact

The project has received widespread recognition and positive feedback from professionals across policing, academia, healthcare and youth justice sectors. Feedback from CYP has described the new suites as “livelier” and “calming”, with one child saying that the updates made them “feel safe”.

Nine duty solicitors in Carlisle have attended the training on child trauma, ACEs, neurodivergence awareness and out-of-court resolutions. This has received positive feedback, highlighting the relevance and impact of the content.

Since the new Carlisle and Barrow custody suites opened, a reduction of use-of-force submissions recorded for CYP and detention times have been observed by the force. This cannot be directly linked to the project at this stage, however data will be continuously monitored in this area.

Learning

By conducting research before approaching senior management, the force were able to obtain leadership buy in early on. This included professional liaison with senior officers in other forces and national subject matter experts for guidance and advice.

The force have experienced challenges with some internal staff and officers in relation to the cell decor, new processes and distraction items being viewed as a reward rather than a punishment. Changing the culture and mindset towards children who are either neurodiverse or have suffered trauma is a large part of this project. The linked ACEs and childhood trauma training has helped assist in providing a holistic overview.

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