

# Child First Systems Change — A View from the Youth Justice Board in England and Wales

## An interview with Stephanie Roberts-Bibby

*Stephanie Roberts-Bibby is Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Board (YJB), a non-departmental public body responsible for overseeing the Youth Justice System in England and Wales. She is interviewed by Dr Amy Ludlow, Chief Executive of SHiFT, a systems change charity committed to breaking the destructive cycle of children caught up in, or at risk of, crime.*

Stephanie Roberts-Bibby became Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Board (YJB) in 2023, having joined the YJB initially in 2018 as the organisation's Chief Operating Officer. She came to the YJB with 21 years' experience of working in, and leading, prisons, her passion for youth justice reform sparked when she started her career as a Prison Officer in HM Young Offenders Institution (YOI) Feltham, in Greater London. This interview took place in January 2025.

**Could you start by telling us your story. Who are you, what makes you spring out of bed in the morning, and how does any of that relate to youth justice?**

I started here at YJB in another role thinking it might only be for one year in 2018, and I'm still here six and a half years later, so that probably talks to my passion for children and young people and trying to drive system change.

I've always been passionate about children. When I was younger, I was going to be a PE teacher. I love children and I like sport, so that was what I was going to do. That shifted when I was doing an A-level project which happened to be at Feltham Young Offenders Institute, where my mum was a Prison Visitor.

I have always been acutely aware that we were lucky as children. There were four of us growing up and both my parents come from working-class backgrounds. My maternal grandparents were Irish immigrants. My Dad's side think of themselves as proper East End people but actually they were Welsh — my Dad's Granddad literally walked from the Welsh Valleys to Brompton to find his fame and fortune in London! My Dad's Mum died when he was 11, and my Dad worked all the hours God sends. We only saw him at weekends and holidays, and our holidays were normally at Christmas because he ran his own business. We didn't want for anything, but I grew up knowing

that what I had at home was quite different to other people and that was, in part, because of the childhoods my parents had experienced and that they wanted the very best for us.

Anyway, back to Feltham and my Mum. When we were all old enough to not need her to do everything for us and she felt she had time, she saw an advert in the paper and became a Prison Visitor there. At that time Prison Visitors were allocated to wings, and my Mum was allocated to the long-term wing that worked with children. She was there every day of the week, making staff tea, listening to their problems and talking to the boys who didn't have families. She raised money for football kits, set up a charity, got an MBE and a Butler Trust award. She was, and is, amazing. And so, when I needed to do a project for my A-levels it wasn't surprising that I found myself spending time in Feltham too. While I was there one of the Governors asked me what I was going to do when I finished at college. I'd always said PE teacher, so I went to Loughborough University, did PE and then in my final year she (the Governor I'd met at Feltham) sent me an application form for the graduate fast track scheme for HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service). At the time my plan was either to do a PGCE, study for a Masters in the sociology of sport, or get a paid job, and so when I read about the fast track, I thought I'd go for it to stop sponging off my parents! But what had also stayed with me from that A-level project I did was the sense of helplessness for everything that was there in Feltham — children and staff. Everything seemed bleak and miserable, and I thought, there is more to life than this, everyone deserves more than this. So, I guess that had hooked me a bit, and the idea that I could do something to make a difference inspired me.

Fast forward to 1997 and I found myself starting as a prison officer on the fast track scheme back in

Feltham. I went native. I worked every hour I could trying to do things for boys to the point where I would be restrained by staff for trying to unlock them at times when other staff didn't want to, mostly I'm sad to say because they believed that 'happiness is door shaped' (meaning when people who are imprisoned are locked up). I got in trouble too for stopping one morning after I'd been on nights for a young boy with an empty bag stood on his own at the top of the road. He'd just been released a day early to be able to go to his Dad's funeral and he didn't know how to get to the train station, so I stuck him in my car and drove him to the station. Someone saw me and the next day I got in trouble. I really tried to mother those children, even though I was only 21 at the time myself.

From there I went to HMP Belmarsh (a High Security adult prison in Greater London). I was there about four years. I did an investigation into racism at HMP Brixton (a Local prison, mostly serving the courts or holding adult men on short sentences in Greater London) and then went to Private Office where I worked closely with Martin Narey (then Chief Executive of the National Offender Management Service — the name of the government body then overseeing prisons and probation services) for a year. And then to Holloway (a women's prison, in Greater London, which was closed in 2016) where I was responsible for girls and young adults. That reignited my passion for working with younger people. Girls were being kept at that time in terrible conditions in Holloway and my work involved influencing the YJB to invest in building a specific unit for girls at HMP Downview (another prison for women, in Surrey), which I was really pleased eventually opened. I then moved to HMP Woodhill (a High Security prison in Milton Keynes) and was Head of Reducing Reoffending. Interestingly, at that time, they'd had a number of children placed who were Restricted Status Category A (assessed as children whose escape would be highly dangerous to the public) and I ended up responsible for them and influencing the YJB for them to be relocated because I didn't think Woodhill was an appropriate environment. I became Deputy Governor and then Acting Governor at Woodhill before going to Brinsford. The YJB had just decommissioned the 110 beds there for children and we were just re-rolling (converting the prison) to be young adults only. Then on to HMP Hewell, a prison for adult men in Worcestershire, where I didn't have any engagement with children. Then I led on 'through the gate'

(resettlement) as part of Transforming Rehabilitation and on after that to HMP Winchester where again, we had young adults.

If I'm honest, by then I was getting to a point where I was questioning my moral leadership. I was wanting to make more change and was feeling hamstrung in my role at Winchester. It was a poor performing prison, and I was trying to make it a better performing prison, but I didn't really have the levers in my control to make it what I wanted it to be. I was feeling frustrated, possibly to the point where I was a bit cynical, and up popped the secondment opportunity at the YJB. So, I applied, was offered it and took it, and have been here ever since. This is the longest I've ever worked anywhere in my adult career, and I really feel like its where I'm meant to be.

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**Tell us more about what the YJB was like when you arrived. What was happening in youth justice at that time?**

I came in 2018, which was just on the back of 'the divorce' as I call it where, because of the success of the YJB since its inception in 1998, everything relating to children and justice had got sucked into it, to a point where potentially you could say that the original intent of having an oversight body that gave advice on preventing offending

by children had diminished because the YJB was too operational. That coincided with a series of reports about the poor performance of justice for children, particularly the secure estate. The then Chief Inspector was saying there was nowhere that could keep children safe, you had the Taylor Review of the Youth Justice System, and the Panorama expose at Medway. This culminated in a number of recommendations going to Ministers that said that the original intent of the YJB should be reset so that it can honour its statutory functions. That led to the creation of Youth Custody Service in 2017 as well as the creation of a Policy Unit within the Ministry of Justice. Actually, at that time it wasn't just policy it was policy and commissioning, sitting with the Ministry of Justice. This commissioning function later moved to the Youth Custody Service, so in some ways now we've gone back full circle, to the commissioner and the provider in the same organisation.

I arrived at a time in 2018 where I think we had a different intent and context to now. At that time the Board and Ministers had really wanted us to drive system change in preventing children offending and the

agreement was that this would be done through driving change through targeted funding and us influencing strategically across the system. That meant that a lot of our resource and capacity was in change and programmes. At that point the evidence base was evolving, but we hadn't created the strong narrative that we now have in Child First (more on that later), based on what we know prevents offending.

Coming into the YJB, I knew what our statutory functions were from the Crime and Disorder Act and it was really clear that the principal aim of this system is to prevent offending by children and that we are accountable to Ministers and Parliament to monitor and oversee the system and provide advice on its effectiveness. It took me a bit of time to really understand that our role was both about overseeing day-to-day operational effectiveness and turning that into advice, and bigger picture advice about how the Youth Justice System can best pursue its principal aim to prevent children offending. So, the YJB is responsible for creating the Standards for Children in Youth Justice, and administering and distributing grants to enable Local Authorities to set up their Youth Justice Teams with the statutory partners — police, probation, education, health and children's services. And alongside that we're also responsible for three other critical elements. First, providing assistance across the system to enable the exchange of information on those children. Second, really importantly, collating and publishing information on the system, especially data and best practise, where we know that's working and then trying to replicate that elsewhere. And then finally, commissioning and publishing research. Over the last five years or so we have dialled down on commissioning research and our focus is more on working with others rather than duplicating what's being done, to make us an efficient and effective organisation.

To summarise, I would say we provide leadership support and challenge to the sector. We collate all our intelligence and information and use that to provide advice to those in frontline services including, critically, the third sector, policymakers and Ministers on what more could be done to prevent children offending. And what really makes us special is that we are the only organisation that oversees the whole system and has an end-to-end perspective, and we do everything, except for the terms and conditions of our grants to Local Authorities, through relationships, soft power and

influence. We are overseeing what are place-based autonomous partnerships who are coming together to deliver services to children, victims, and communities. It's this that makes the system work so effectively — our power comes from partnership.

**I hear in that both power and effectiveness, but also presumably some challenge — it's hard work to drive effectiveness through soft power. And that is also quite a different position for you to be in personally, as a leader, compared to your previous role as a prison Governor, isn't it?**

Absolutely. Yes, really different because in my other roles, not because I've wanted to, but I had significant formal power. The reason I feel more

comfortable here is I don't really like hierarchy. I experienced that early on in my career. I can remember being on the High Security Unit at HMP Belmarsh, for example, and introducing myself by my first name to a High Risk Category A prisoner and then being pulled in by the then Principal Officer of the unit saying 'we don't tell them our first name here'. And I said, 'I'd much rather tell them my first name actually than them know my surname, and I am a human being, and I want to work like that'. I don't really like the term 'prisoner'. Call

me 'Steph'. I'd come to Belmarsh from working with children, and although everyone else at Feltham at that time was known by Miss or Mr, I was more than happy for those children to call me Steph. I had no problem with that, and I find I work better in a relational way with people rather than relying on my perceived position of power in an organisation. Governing a prison is similar in some ways to being a Chief Executive but in my role now at the YJB there's a big difference that I don't have the full force of a framework behind me or the Agency of HMPPS. I have the full force of a Board of experts and Ministers, but there can be a response of 'so what, you can't tell us what to do', so you have to use an evidence base that you know is effective, and you have to answer the question 'why', rather than saying 'because I said' or 'because that PSO (Prison Service Order) or PSI (Prison Service Instruction) says'.

**If we zoom out a bit further, what are some of the features of the YJB or features of youth justice in England and Wales that might be especially striking for people working in other jurisdictions?**

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There's been a quiet evolution of success in the system. By success, I mean first the significant reduction of first-time entrants, and the reduction we've seen in the number of children in custody. But set against that, others might be fascinated and alarmed by our age of criminal responsibility, so, when you look at us compared to Cuba, Argentina, Hong Kong, Tanzania, Finland, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Turkey, all of these countries have a higher age of criminal responsibility than ours in England and Wales at ten. We are such an outlier. This also includes the enduring impact of convictions on children as criminal records. For a system that says in the Crime and Disorder Act that we are set up to prevent children offending, alongside honouring children's rights and adults' responsibilities to them, there's a real disconnect with saying we're holding you criminally responsible from the age of ten. England and Wales has quite rightly been criticised about this by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for not working to the accepted international standard of 12.

**Is there anything important to note about the context for young people in England and Wales**

In some ways the context is possibly similar for children and young people across parts of Europe. If we think about the last five years, we've had Brexit, which inevitably has disrupted the labour market. We've had the pandemic, which we know has been worldwide and has affected how professionals have engaged with children and importantly the experiences of those children and their maturation. Their access to normal childhood activities was stunted to the point now that we have some children who do not feel able and safe to go to school in the way you or I did. On top of that you've got war. And these things together have created a significant cost of living crisis. We already knew pre-pandemic, pre-war, pre-Brexit, the links between deprivation, housing overcrowding and offending, as well as the evidence base around the impact of trauma on children and links to offending. So, you've got all of that in a melting pot alongside pre 2020 evidence about significant over-representation of children with speech, language and communication challenges in the Youth Justice System, as well as the compelling evidence of disproportionality and adultification of children who are Black, Brown or Mixed Heritage which results in their

over-representation in the harder end of the youth justice system and poorer outcomes for them. On top of all of that you have salami slicing of investment year on year in public services, which means that the demand is way outstripping the resource that's there. While we've done so well in youth justice in applying the evidence base that means we've had this huge success in the system, the application of the evidence base hasn't properly percolated into other systems.

**Shall we pause there and talk about that evidence base. You mentioned Child First earlier. What is Child First?**

In essence we have translated decades and decades of evidence and international research on what works in preventing children offending into a framework called the Child First framework of evidence. There are four clear tenets of the framework which are (1) treating children as children — honouring their rights and adults honouring their responsibilities to uphold those rights; (2) taking a strength-based approach so always coming from a point of goodness, and building on strength, looking for strengths and they are in every one of us and with children we again have a responsibility to untap those; (3) collaborating with and promoting the voice of the child so children are involved in their

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plans, they have a some agency about what's going to happen to them and it's done with them rather than to them; (4) and then finally diverting children from the Criminal Justice System and the stigma that's associated with that.

It's interesting to think about how we could overlay some of that onto other statutory services that are critical in the lives of children, like education, for example. If we did a quick thinking through of Child First, and those four tenets I've just talked through, in relation to a child who may be being 'naughty' or 'bad', and I put those words in inverted commas — a child who is seen as disruptive. Are teachers using that four-point checklist to say, what's happening for this child here and now? What is this behaviour a manifestation of? What has happened to this child that is making them behave this way? And how are they feeling? We are seeing more and more children not engaging in education and we know that education is a critical protective factor. We need to be looking at how we, in



justice, can better support other mainstream services to understand children's behaviour and maximise inclusion, which in turn maximises safety and reduces victims and harm.

**Yes, and in a way that brings us round to who the children are who are at risk of coming into conflict with the law. Because although there have been these successes as you've described in reduced numbers of first-time entrants and children in custody, children with complex needs, and cumulative disadvantage, experiencing harm and sometimes also causing harm to others, haven't gone away, have they?**

That's absolutely right. We should talk about some of the statistics here. Our last set of statistics, for 2022/23, show that over the last decade, the number of first time entrants reduced by 72 per cent, which is massive, and the number of children in custody reduced by a similar figure 71 per cent. That is a transformation of a system. And we know, because of the evidence base, that this transformation is much more likely to reduce reoffending and offending by children because by not bringing them into the system, particularly the hard end of the system — custody — we are not stigmatising them. Some of the early evidence shows that this is impacting on the adult system as well — reducing the number of young adults coming into the adult Criminal Justice System. So that is massive impact on the lives of children which should help to reduce harm, victimisation and improve safety.

But those 72 per cent of children who are being diverted have not gone away. They still have a set of circumstances and the systems around those children still need the support and money to work with them to reduce the harm they face and sometimes also cause. Our ongoing investment in early intervention, prevention and diversion is absolutely critical. These are children with really complex needs, children who have likely had four or more adverse childhood experiences, be living in an area of high deprivation, potentially will be care experienced (a rather ironic term 'looked after' by the State) and, we know from our own evidence, are likely to have some element of difference, which might be neurodivergence, speech, language, communication, and are disproportionately Black, Brown or Mixed Heritage or from the Gypsy, Roma or Travelling communities. These are children who because of their circumstances are also more vulnerable to exploitation and are targeted by organised crime gangs for moving drugs, weapons, selling drugs, or sexually exploited. So, the landscape is complex, these children's needs are complex, and our absolute view is that children need an individualised approach, with highly skilled adults they can trust, who understand

what is happening and has happened to them and, from that, work out with them how to make things safer for them and for others.

**What's your sense of how well we are currently meeting the needs of children in these circumstances?**

Their needs are being met to varying degrees and it's important that we think about this across the whole spectrum of services. So, starting first thinking about our universal youth work offer, there is huge variation here. Recently, I visited an amazing service called Spotlight in Tower Hamlets. It was connected to a secondary school, open seven days a week, with a phenomenal health offer. There is no reason why this type of provision can't exist everywhere — but it doesn't. And whilst I get that the financial position, and money is tight, money is there for quite a lot of this stuff, but what varies is the collective imagination and determination to make it happen in ways that genuinely make a difference to all children, including some of the most marginalised children who are often also those on Youth Justice's 'books'. Youth Justice services are carrying a lot of the responsibility of the broader partnership and one of the things we need to do now is to equal up that contribution from across the statutory partnership. Some of that is about funding and making it a mandatory obligation that there is a consistent contribution to enable a consistent offer whether you're in Sunderland or Suffolk. That's not me saying that the system needs to be nationalised — I am absolutely against that — I'm saying that there should be a requirement that everyone puts in a certain amount that is matching the justice commitment that comes from the Ministry of Justice via the YJB. And then health come in, and education come in, and they say this is our financial offer, but this is also our service offer. So that in this locality we commit to engaging with all children, including children who are involved with youth justice. At the moment, we are hearing that some children who are on a youth justice order are being told that they can't go to college because they're working with youth justice services. How can that support the system's principal aim? That's a real example where at the moment children's needs are not being met by the statutory partnership and that's got to change. We are at a moment in time in my view, ahead of the Spending Review, where we can really influence the standards for justice and re-define what the offer for children working with youth justice services looks like from mainstream services. We particularly need to focus on education, health and policing, describing what these mainstream services do to prevent the criminalisation of children and to stop children unnecessarily being brought into the justice system. I

come back to say it's not all about money, it's about having practitioners who understand the evidence base and have the training, resources and support they need to apply it in their day-to-day practice. It's also not all about policy, though of course there are some policy changes that could be helpful, to drive the sort of behaviours we want. But we mustn't stand still as if we can't make any progress without new money or new policy — we can, and we must.

**Zooming in on that small but important minority of children who nevertheless are in conflict with the law and are pulled into the formal Youth Justice System, including custody. How well are we meeting their needs?**

Naively, I knew what Youth Offending Institutions (YOIs) looked like, because I'd worked in one, and I knew what a Secure Training Centre looked like because I was working in HMP Woodhill when we opened one next door, but I'd never been in a Secure Children's Home until I started at the YJB. Let's be clear Secure Children's Homes are the best bit of our secure provision at the moment. They're seen as the flagship of the secure element of care for children in justice, and yet I don't think the public widely know that Secure Children's Homes will have barbed wire around them and have the same locks that were in the last prison I governed at Winchester. Now that's not uniformly true because you go to places like Barton Moss (a Secure Children's Home in Greater Manchester for boys), and that's excellent, but that's because it has been hand crafted by two managers over twenty years. But what this means for the 430 or so children currently in custody in England and Wales is that there is huge variation in what life in custody looks like for you — the offer is so different. Our YOIs are just not fit for purpose. They do not have the right physical environment, investment, processes, and there is something about the commissioner/provider relationship (which is now all back with Youth Custody Services) that just does not work. And because Youth Custody sits within His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) the policy framework for YOIs is just overlaid from adults — we treat children as mini adults, which flies in the face of the evidence, including about neurodevelopment.

Going forward, there is an opportunity to really strengthen alternatives to remand. Of those 430 children in custody, we know that around 41 per cent

are there on remand — without a sentence — and, of those children, 72 per cent do not get a custodial sentence. How can it be that we disrupt a child's life, give them a pro-criminal identity, kick them back out to the community where their college now won't take them because they're open to youth justice, their Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) wasn't delivered in custody, and then we go 'okay great, well done, go ahead and live a crime free life'. Oh, and, we've put you back in the same estate where you were exploited before and you're sharing a bedroom with your three siblings in a house with a parent who has a whole host of challenges that mean they can't really look after you properly. Those are the areas that are deeply broken in the system and that speaks to my previous point about

children in the community where statutory services aren't always stepping up to support them. I know it's difficult, I know everyone has thresholds and challenges, but we have got to do better. Going back to youth custody, I am ashamed to be a leader of the organisation that oversees our Youth Justice System, when it has been 28 years since I started working in criminal justice, and there has been no change at Feltham (a Young Offender's Institution). I

talk to Feltham not because I'm being rude to the Governor of Feltham or indeed rude to Youth Custody Services, but this is my personal point of reference from when I started. How can that in a modern civilised society be right?

**You mentioned workforce earlier, so I wanted to come back to that before we look ahead to what next.**

Yes, let me say something first then about workforce in the secure estate since that's where we have just been in our conversation. There's something about understanding the messiness of custody, which I genuinely don't think many people do, and the challenges that poses, particularly for young new staff. Putting myself in a new Officer's shoes, you have to keep this person here — there is an element of containment — and then you are also required to help them, but in this environment which is absolutely not fit for purpose where you have no freedom because the core day is dictated to you. So actually, as a prison officer, or key worker, you have all these constraints put on you before you even talk to a child, and, not necessarily given the right skills and training in the first place. Again, if we go back to the evidence base, what

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we know works is small, homely environments, with staff who are trained in understanding children in terms of their maturation, development, and behaviour. So that's the starting point for custody, and we know that many staff currently working in custodial environments with children don't understand these things and are not equipped to. And then adding into that, there is not enough of them. Staffing ratios in a YOI compared to a Secure Children's Home are much lower. So working in a YOI you're already off to a more difficult start because you're working with more children who all have complex needs who are often being seen as something different to what they actually are because they're six foot and Black — I'm going to an extreme and calling out the adultification here deliberately to make the point — charged with murder rather than seeing the 14 year old vulnerable boy who is themselves a victim and has been exploited and abused.

**And you're probably getting assaulted quite a bit too as a prison officer in a YOI?**

Well yes or if you're not being assaulted then you are preventing harm to others. If I think back to my time as a Prison Officer in that environment, I didn't get assaulted — I was pinned to a wall once — but there were very few days where I was not involved in a restraint. So even if children's frustration wasn't aimed at me, I was around high levels of violence and that has an impact. The other thing that we haven't spoken about that has a massive impact on staff is self-harm. There are a small number of children, including girls — a really important minority within the Youth Justice System — who have high levels of self-harm as their mechanism for coping with life. This is really hard to work with in custody. We know that saying 'don't do that' doesn't work but policies still push in that direction rather than saying, this is this child's coping mechanism, how do we minimise the harm and work with them, with a strategy, so that we're not taking everything out of their room, which increases risk, putting them in strip clothing, and avoiding situations where children are smashing their television, threatening to harm staff, cutting everywhere with dirty blades, without proactive medical guidance. This is really hard for staff to work through.

The other issue I want to talk about in terms of workforce is the pandemic and this assumption that we just go back to what we were before. We haven't acknowledged as professionals and practitioners what changes happened to us and our lives through the

pandemic. As an example, if you're a teacher, in 2019, you were happy going into a classroom day in day out with 30 children. It was your norm. Get to 2020 in the pandemic and the whole way you work is different — its either through a screen or at school with a handful of keyworker children. Okay pandemic 'over' now, let's do our recovery plans and boom, you're back in a room with maybe more than 30 children because you've had to make some efficiencies in your class sizes as well. And each of those 30 children's experiences have been different, your resilience is absolutely diminished, you've got cumulative fatigue, and then you are having to respond to the needs of now 34, or 36, children who have had some stunted development, maybe witnessed some violence within the home and perhaps undertaken some violence themselves, have been exploited, are hungrier than ever, and we think that just keeping doing what we've always done before in mainstream education is going to grow us well rounded adults who can contribute to our economy. Something has to change.

In five years, I would love for there to be a system that doesn't attribute a label to a child.

**And is there a parallel there for youth justice staff?**

Absolutely, there is a parallel, but there is a slight difference, which is that staff who work with children in justice have a better understanding of the behaviour and the complexity of what's underpinning it, and have better opportunity to work with fewer children. So, if you're a teacher, as I said, you might be working with 34 or 36 children whereas if you are a Youth Justice Worker your case load is less than that. There is something terrible in youth justice that when you are hitting that threshold, with being the most complex and highest needs, you are getting a service, which feels really bizarre because actually shouldn't we be thinking about more effective support much earlier in the system and better identify those most vulnerable children? Going forward, this is where I do get excited, because we know here and now who the children are who we should be focusing on. Technology and AI are developing at such a pace we should be able to go much further up stream in terms of data mapping and matching to identify children. If, for example, every child had a speech and language assessment before they transitioned to secondary school, how many children could we make a difference to? A huge number. There are some simple things that aren't huge cost that we could do. The tech infrastructure with some investment could be significantly different and really help practitioners in all sorts of ways including sorting the wheat from the chaff in terms of case notes,

making best use of a practitioner's skills rather than them sitting for hours and hours going through or writing up case notes and assessments. Going back to your question, there is a slight difference but also plenty of shared challenges for our youth justice workforce. The challenge community staff have to carry is that, when a child is being exploited and goes missing for example, they know what's happening and there's nothing they can do — they feel powerless. I did a visit recently to a Youth Justice team and spent an hour just talking about how staff felt carrying that burden; carrying that responsibility of knowing they are doing everything they can do and yet there are people with huge power and influence over children still able to reach them and get them to do things which damage them further, and put them and others at significant risk. Community practitioners carry that much more than colleagues in custody.

**Let's think forward now to your hopes. Where do you hope youth justice will be in five years' time in England and Wales?**

In five years, I would love for there to be a system that doesn't attribute a label to a child, whether that be a criminogenic label or a label that affects the way they see themselves and inadvertently perhaps gives them permission to not conform in terms of making the most out of themselves and their lives. I would really love to see a social justice system, that extends into health, policing and education, which is based on evidence — relational, trauma informed practice rather than 'you've done this thing, this is what I now need to do to you'. I'm not diminishing the experience of victims, because putting evidence at the centre of things is all about preventing further harm and victimisation. Within that, we've got to recognise that these children are themselves victims. There are very few cases I have seen where children who have caused harm to others have not also themselves experienced harm and been victims of their own circumstances. It's important that we think of children in youth justice in this light but then also avoid giving them unhelpful labels that they could carry into adulthood as 'I'm a victim'. Getting the balance right here is challenging, but we've got to drive a more nuanced and evidence-led understanding of victimhood, and how to prevent offending and therefore victimisation if we are to prevent future offending and future victims.

An important part of what's needed to make that happen is government making tough decisions about where it's going to invest in youth work that's truly inclusive — like the place I visited and talked about earlier, Spotlight in Tower Hamlets. We know we haven't got enough for everyone to have everything, so we need to be clear about which communities most

need 'a Spotlight'. If we look at data and evidence we know those areas, we know the areas of greatest deprivation. So, let's give those children in those communities the lifting up they need as part of the Government's Opportunities Mission. That's my hope number two.

Hope number three is that custody is only used for children when absolutely necessary. There's a big question for me about whether remand is on all occasions necessary and whether we could have a different place-based accommodation like the London Accommodation pathfinder offering children a safe and supported place to live that prevents them being taken into custody. And the second part of that is that when children do get a custodial sentence there should be a service which honours their rights as children, and our responsibilities to them as adults. That service needs to understand that some of those children are getting long sentences so will transition into the adult justice system. These transitions need to be better supported than is currently happening and hold in mind the ultimate goal to prevent offending at the end of what is likely to be a long double-digit sentence. In five years, I don't think we will be saying that children won't be committing those offences. That's still way into the future because there's still lots to be done, sadly. And so you don't have Youth Offending Institutions, you have a range of community based alternatives that are safe and secure but not prisons, which is in essence what we have with our Youth Offending Institutions. And whether that looks at the hard end something like a secure school, we will see, but certainly not a Feltham or a Wetherby.

My final big hope for five years' time is that our mainstream services have the skills and resources to be able to keep and hold — a caring hold — our most vulnerable children in their mainstream provision, particularly education. Proper inclusion, which is deeply practised by all services that shape children's lives.

**Thank you so much Steph, that's a powerful way to end. A final short question to close, drawing you back to the personal. If you had the chance to go back in time and offer a sentence of advice to your younger self starting out on her career as a Prison Officer in Feltham, what would you say?**

One of the best people I ever worked with said to me 'life is a marathon not a sprint', very wise words. I would merge that with 'don't try and change everything and everyone on your own and yesterday'. It takes a village to raise a child so spend time finding out who your neighbours are and work with them to make the changes needed. To summarise, slow down and don't do everything yourself.