

# Interview with Ed Cornmell, Executive Director of HMPPS' Youth Custody Service

*Ed Cornmell was appointed Executive Director of the Youth Custody Service in October 2022. He has held previous Deputy Director roles with responsibility for prison operations, in the Transforming Delivery in Prisons Programme, and for COVID-19 Prison Gold Command. He has also been Governor at HMP Full Sutton, HMP Humber, and HMP Everthorpe. He was interviewed by **Rachel Gibson**, who is co-editor of the Prison Service Journal and based in HMPPS Evidence-Based Practice team.*

The interview was conducted in January, 2024.

**Some of our readers might be less familiar with how the Youth Custody Service (YCS) operates, can you give a brief overview?**

I agree that the YCS is perhaps not understood by everybody across HMPPS. There isn't understanding of the different sectors of youth custody and the population of children and young people themselves. I'll probably often use the words 'complex' and 'complexity' throughout this interview, and this complexity features across the estate. So, we can currently hold in custody children who are remanded or convicted and sentenced from the age of criminal responsibility of age 10, all the way up to adulthood. Since November 2022, we've also held a higher number of 18 year olds, which was a response to the capacity pressures in the adult prison estate. So, we currently have just under 600 people in youth custody and fewer than 500 children in custody, which is such a small number in comparison to the 88,000 figure that we have across the entire prison system.

But the complexity comes again in terms of the needs, the risks, and the profile of those children. We also have the added complexity of different rules and sectors of operation. So, the YCS is responsible for direct delivery in England of four Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) for people under the age of 18. In partnership with HMPPS Wales, we have oversight of the Young People's Unit operated under YOI rules at HMP Parc in Wales, operated by G4S. That is effectively sector 1 (the YOIs). Sector 2, we have the Secure Training Centre (STC), which is now just one site, Oakhill in Milton Keynes. STCs are governed by different rules and, as happens within adult custody, there is some added work for the YCS in terms of the

operation of the contract for the site and working with G4S colleagues. On top of that we have a third sector, we commission beds in eight secure children's homes across the country. I think is perhaps this is the most unseen part of the YCS, particular among colleagues working in adult custody; that our children live in accommodation shared with other children who have had their liberty deprived for welfare reasons, and these are local authority delivered secure children's homes that are more homely environments, and close to the communities that they largely serve. And, of course, a very different environment from the prison-like environments that YOIs are, and that's very much part of the story of the YCS. Very soon there will be a fourth sector which is the new Secure School due to open in Medway, Kent under different rules again, and is a new innovative form of delivery.

And finally, we are a front-line operational directorate, but because of the focus on children, we have very unique and distinct policies and wider responsibilities held at headquarters level, not just in terms of managing different provisions, like the contracted sites, working with local authorities to commission beds, which is complicated and different, but also our own distinct provision for children. So, for example, instead of the population management unit in the adult estate, we have a dedicated placements team who place and manage every child who is in custody. We have distinct policies that are just relevant to children, and we have a large safeguarding responsibility for the children too. These create different central responsibilities across the system at headquarter. So, very different to adult custody.

**You've really reflected on the complexity of YCS, despite the small numbers of children, in**

**relation to the similarities with the wider organisation, but also the distinct differences that exist and the work needed to navigate these. You've been the Executive Director of YCS for just over a year; what was it that attracted you to taking on the role?**

This is the first time I have worked with children in custody, and I work with a great number of colleagues who have specialised their career around working with children. So, it took some time to properly know what I was doing and to understand the YCS and to learn some of the things that I didn't know before. This March (2024) is my 24th year within HMPPS. I've had a largely operational career working in adult male custody and I think there were two reasons why I was fascinated by what I saw. The first reason was around that complexity again; it's (YCS) almost like a jewel really, that it's small, precious, pretty bespoke, intricate, and quite expensive. But the weight of the jewel means that it needs work to support it and to deliver the right outcomes. I am somebody who is very service oriented, that's why I do the job that I do, and our job is very much to serve the public and then serve the needs of those people who work in the organisation to deliver the very best service and outcomes, be that for adults or children within the system. And I can't think of a greater responsibility, in our world of custody in particular, of holding securely children in custody, acting sometimes in a parental role. It is such a responsibility caring for the children of other people, but actually we're looking also at those children, and what their needs are, and trying to meet those needs and support them to turn their lives around at an early age. It's a huge responsibility. And as a father, I put myself in the position of the parents of the children we look after. I think about if my child was in custody, what would I want for them, how would I want them to be supported and cared for? And if, in the worst circumstances, we need to use force against a child for example, the significance of that weighs very heavily. But I suppose is very much a reason why the calling was there to say, 'actually this is an area that I

can serve, there is something I can do here differently'.

The second reason that was in my thinking was that too many times in my career in long-term adult prisons I spoke to older men who said, 'if only just', and they've looked back at their younger selves, quite often in youth custody and at the first serious offence and realised that actually they had an opportunity to perhaps take a different course. And for whatever reason, they didn't take it. They couldn't find it. They didn't get the support. We have an opportunity in the YCS at an early stage to make a huge difference for

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the public we serve, by reducing the impact on victims through a life spent carrying out acts of serious offending, which we can often see, and is perhaps really prevalent within our population given the nature of those offences that our children commit to come into custody. But really, that chance to make a change and prevent that regret in the future by giving them an opportunity now. I've learnt so much since being in the role, it's even more complex, has even more challenges than I previously comprehended. But I'm still resolute, we can make a difference, people make a difference, I see that difference every day, and we need to make more of a difference.

**It sounds like you had some very personal reasons for wanting to take on the role, reflecting on some of your other experiences working across the estate with people serving significant sentences. I wonder if planting those seeds, even if the circumstances for change are not right at that moment, is also part of the role of YCS. It might not lead to the outcomes immediately, but if someone has a positive experience of engaging, is able to develop a positive relationship with a member of staff, this might mean that when circumstances are different, they do engage, as they remember that positive experience of when someone cared.**

I think your description is spot on. It's the little things. We perhaps are not going to, realistically, in all cases make whole scale change, especially in a

short timescale that we often have children in custody for. But there are small changes we can make. There are two guiding parts for me, which I am challenged by but is where we should be, I go back to my responsibility of looking after children that we should do no harm. There is a great deal of risk there, we can do harm, so we've got to work to reduce and remove that. Second, we've got to focus on progress, and progress can be small, it can be really small, but as you describe it, it can plant the seed for growth in the future or it can be something that really is a breakthrough. We've got to find what that small progressive step is for each child and young person. It varies so much, but if we find that, then we can make that difference for them for the future.

**And with smaller populations, there are more opportunities to think about people at an individual level, than in some other parts of the prison estate. So, what have been some of your highlights to date?**

From a macro level, in terms of the challenges of the estate, within the last year we have seen a huge reduction in violence. I call that out because it's a huge thing and when I talk about 'doing no harm', it absolutely crucial that we work further on safety and particularly violence within the children and young people's secure estate because it is such a key issue, particularly within YOI settings.

I think the other large-scale change that is a highlight, which is still a work in progress, is the secure school that opens this year. It's been a long project, again with lots of complexity, but I am really pleased with the progress made and see this as a real opportunity to do something different.

The micro level is always the individual; it's always that job well done and there are so many stories across the estate of staff working in different teams, and in different disciplines, who just made that difference for the individual child and young person. Who've gone the extra mile, to work through that adverse period where it's been challenging, through either self-harm or violence, where they've managed the complexity of that behaviour through

consistency, to build a trusting relationship. They're the things that give me energy and I can see that we're doing good here, we can make a difference.

**You mentioned briefly about challenges. What would your reflections be on the current challenges facing YCS?**

I think this is in the space of the complexity of the estate. So, a real success in our system, and the wider criminal justice system, is that we've successfully reduced the number of children in custody. And to say that 15 years ago we had about 3000 children in custody, and we've got fewer than 500 children now, that's a massive achievement. It's such a positive, in terms of the work being done in the community to divert, find alternatives to custody, to provide that support in a community setting, and to prevent any harm coming from the removal of someone from their community and family. But it comes at a cost and that is the biggest challenge, that we have such a challenging population of children with acute needs who are coming into custody later in their childhood.

The average age of children in the YCS is 17 years, and we see those children having, unfortunately, committed the most serious offences. Two thirds of the current population within youth custody have carried out acts of violence against the person, and that's in comparison to one third in the adult estate. And we are the place where we look after those children, and we make a difference. But that's such a dominant part of our estate, and that concentration of numbers, additionally with the closure of sites — we shrank our provision. And so, we've got a concentration of high risk, high need children, quite often some distance from home. And if I look back at my career, I spent a lot of time working in high security prisons. I was the Governor of a dispersal prison at HMP Full Sutton. The work that was done in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Sir Leon Radzinowicz around the review of what we do with our highest risk prisoners in the system for adults; we made a really clear policy decision to disperse — we put our highest risk prisoners into a larger population where the risk wasn't quite as

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acute. By default, in youth custody, we've got concentration, we've gone in that direction by default rather than through intent. It is a strength and a success, but it means now that for the YCS the biggest challenge is responding to that and it's highly likely that the challenge will increase.

And the challenges are compounded by an increasing level of neurodiversity and mental health issues among children who come into custody. A large number of our children have been both victims as well as perpetrators of adverse experiences. So, it really is a challenging population of children to care for, and it's the challenge for us to meet those needs and do things differently. I describe the jewel that is YCS, and it does need to be polished and it needs to be shinier. Holding a child in custody is an expensive thing, and it should be because we need and we deserve for the children a higher level of staffing supervision to meet those complex needs and to manage some of the risks. But, when we look at the evidence in terms of what works, it is often about conditions that are smaller, more homely, and closer to the community where the children have come from. And that is very different from a larger prison environment that dominates our YOI sector. I describe a twin-track approach: I've got to drive improvement for performance, better outcomes, and safe and more purposeful sites across the estate. But in the long-term, we need to transform the estate. We need to provide a different youth custody system that looks at the evidence. Where the evidence tells us that we've not got child-centred environments, which is largely our YOI estate that are adult prison builds by design, we need to shift that. That's not to say there's no role for the work done within YOIs; there's fantastic work done. But the size, structure, and orientation of YOIs is a challenge based on the nature of our population.

**That description of that dual focus really makes sense; improving outcomes and performance within the constraints of the current context and environment, but also exploring the future design of YCS. So, moving on a little, YCS have committed to professionalising the role of staff working with children in custody, with the introduction of the**

**Youth Justice Qualification, for example. How is this work progressing? What impact is this having on staff and children in our prisons?**

This is very much part of our improvement and will hopefully support the transformation over the long-term. So, there's very clear evidence that a child-first focus is the right approach to provide the right intervention, support, and care for children in custody. And the YCS is absolutely signed up and very clearly focused on being a child-centred service. To do that, we need the skills, and we are nothing without our staff and people; people make the difference. And with the complexity of the population, we've got to therefore provide very child-centred training and development for our staff. Working in a custodial environment as a proud prison officer, prison Governor, and somebody who's been a custodian for 24 years, there's a basic level of what would be described as 'jail craft' in an adult setting, that is universal and is shared. But there is something very different about working with children, and we've got to support staff to do that well. We made a step a couple of years ago to professionalise the workforce. That was an offer of foundation degrees and higher qualifications for staff working within youth custody as youth justice workers (our equivalent of prison officers). Those staff go through the same foundation training as a prison officer, but then we offer child-centred training as part of foundation degree which focuses on children and safeguarding. It then moves into the higher level, which currently is a level four apprenticeship which is required of all youth justice workers working within the youth estate. It's something that I've reviewed since I've been in post, and our focus on professionalising the workforce is the right approach, but we've learnt over that timescale that we perhaps could do it differently. There's something about the sequencing of training and development, so that we're supporting new staff coming into the role to gain confidence and competence. There's also a reflection that we've got some fantastic staff, who irrespective of their desire to engage in formal education, are child-centred and have brilliant skills, so there is a

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balance in how we professionalise the workforce and how we recognise the skills of the staff that we've got. So, we are undertaking a review of our current position, to see how we could do something different.

The nature of multidisciplinary working within the YCS means that it's important that we are not just focusing on youth justice workers. There's a wider workforce from different disciplines and professions, and staff who work in STCs, and for the local authority in Secure Children's Homes. There's a lot to learn across those boundaries, and we've made a step forward to try and break down barriers, to share more across different sectors, and to connect staff more, because we look after the same children, albeit sometimes different ages and in different locations, but there's a lot to learn from each other. But then there's a lot to do together with colleagues in psychology, within education, within healthcare, and for us in terms of the community and youth offending teams (YOTs) and other community partners coming in. That's an area I've focused on, I want to be open to the best skills, knowledge, and expertise in the sector. We've tried to communicate better, be good partners, and to share what we're doing over this last year, and we've continued to do some things that we've done for a while now; we have a head of safeguarding who has experience of working in the community, who brings that in day in, day out, to their role. We are also open to other partners working with us, so we are developing an advisory board that was formed to bring in some of that sectoral expertise and to invite colleagues to work with us to make the difference, to do both that improvement work, as well as transform the system.

So, there's a lot to learn from other colleagues across the youth justice sector, and we continue to want to be part of that wider sector and look at how we develop the workforce, be that in the community, be that in other different settings of custody, or across different disciplines.

**You played a key role in helping the organisation to navigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and we know the impact of this is still being felt in prisons. What work is being done within YCS to learn from our experiences of Covid-19 and ensure that opportunities for children within our prisons return to pre-pandemic levels?**

It's different being on the other side; as one of the lead gold commanders through Covid it was quite often me issuing the instructions about restricted regimes and made controlled changes that

we had to make to get us through the pandemic. So, the boot is on the other foot in terms of the impact of the pandemic within the YCS. With credit to colleagues, and my predecessor (Helga Swindenbank), the

commissioning of the CoRE (Covid-19 Research and Evaluation) research was an opportunity to learn from Covid, engage with children and staff, and it's influenced our recovery.<sup>1</sup> Within the research there were 55 key questions for leaders, and four strategic recommendations; these have prompted us to look into how we can create smaller groups for children to mix within, which was informed by children describing feeling safer in smaller groups. There is a danger that we could move into children identifying with a group and gang-forming

behaviours, but it's similar to the experience within secure children's homes, which have smaller environments where we get better outcomes. Our children with a predominance of violence in their history are hypersensitive and hypervigilant in our YOIs regimes, and we see some of their community behaviours manifesting in custody. Whereas, in that smaller setting, as they experienced in Covid, they were able to interact and engage more. So that's a challenge for the future, as small groups are also inefficient in terms of enabling time out of room and access to education, but there's clear learning that must inform the transformation strategy of the size

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1. Evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on the Youth Custody Service - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

of our institutions and how we bring children together.

The heart of the recommendations were about relationships mattering. If we've got really well recruited and developed staff (back to professionalisation), you form the very best relationships with our children, we get the very best outcomes. The YCS continued to focus on children through the pandemic, to keep them safe, provide care, and develop relationships. I am very clear that for the future it's about how we provide that support that enriches the life of children, that looks at the child fully, not just through an education lens, but through all of the other aspects that they need. The core part of the challenge, across the adult estate and the YCS, is that we've not returned to facilitating the

same amount of the time out of room, the levels of education, or enrichment activities that we had prior to the pandemic. We continue to struggle, but we are increasing that time out of room within the YOI settings. It hasn't been the same issue in the STCs and Secure Children's Homes; we deliver a lot more time out of room and access to education there than in the prison-like environments. But we've seen the context change post-Covid; we've seen a heavy churn and turnover of staff, we've got vacancies at some sites, we've faced some challenges around retention.

And therefore, we've got a staff group that needs support and development to manage what's an increasingly complex group of children. So, it isn't just Covid, but we need to increase the young people's time out of room and access to education, and that's absolutely the improvements that we're focused on now. The best way to do that, in my view, is through SECURE STAIRS, which is our framework for integrated care in partnership with NHS England.<sup>2</sup> That is the bedrock of developing and supporting our staff to have the best relationships, to understand the needs of our children, to put a clear plan together that responds to those needs, risks, challenges. Covid disrupted the roll-out of SECURE STAIRS in the YOIs, but I'm committed to making sure that we bring in SECURE STAIRS effectively. And I think that's the recovery that will really make a difference following the pandemic.

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**We've touched on this briefly already, but relationships with community partners and stakeholders is different for the YCS than for the adult estate, given that community youth justice services sit within the local authorities. How does YCS navigate this to ensure that good communication and partnership working takes place, and to support successful transition planning?**

This is an area of increased focus, and I think if I am right with my numbers, we've currently got over 150 youth offending teams who sit in different local authorities across England and Wales. Those colleagues do a fantastic job and have got responsibility for children in custody for their transition back into the community, and their supervision and care whilst in the community. That in itself is a challenge, particularly when we've got a shrunken secure estate and where some of our sites are quite a considerable distance from the home area, the youth offending team where that child is cared for, and where their family and community is. So, geography doesn't help us and it's partly why transformation of the estate would be a strength for us.

We are trying to increase our openness. In our YOIs, Governors are frequently now holding open days and sessions to bring in YOTs and Directors of Children's Services. The different statutory responsibility around safeguarding goes above and beyond what we see in the adult prison estate, so it's important that we have effective relationships across partners. Each site sits in the local authority, with the local authority designated officer, safeguarding board, and Director of Children's Services, and other key stakeholders with responsibilities for children. That relationship matters so much in terms of keeping children safe. But we have a real push to do more, to engage more, because we want to see youth offending colleagues coming into our sites. We want to increase access to children, and the fact that we have Launchpad laptops and in-room telephones available for each child in YOIs means that the ability to have contact has increased and is a strength that we are looking to

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Freud. Independent evaluation of the Framework for Integrated Care (SECURE STAIRS). (2022). [annafrued.org](https://annafrued.org).

build on. And we are looking at what we can do to bring youth offending team colleagues into our sites, allowing them to carry keys, who can work alongside directly employed staff.

So, there is a lot we are doing, but we need to do more. The biggest challenge when our children go back to the community, particularly looked after children who need to go back into formal care, is being able to provide suitable accommodation. That is a real challenge for community colleagues, and we need to do more to secure that. And perhaps, again, there's learning from other parts of the estate for the YCS; we don't have approved premises in a way that would be typical within probation, so there are some areas to explore for the future.

**You've already mentioned a bit about secure schools, and work appears to be progressing, with the opening scheduled for early 2024. Can you tell us more about the goals and aspirations for this new way of working? How will the impact of this new approach be explored/evaluated?**

This is a fantastic transformation and change, and it's taken many years to get here. It's a unique provision that brings together the rules and regulations around secure children's homes but integrates those with the policies for academy trusts within the community, so the secure school will be a secure academy trust. It will be delivered by Oasis Restore, which is a dedicated charity and a not-for-profit provider. In terms of the vision, it's a school with security. It's not a prison-like environment where education is added in; it's an environment that's really focused on education and wellbeing. So, health and wellbeing is up there with education, to deliver the very best outcomes for children, to be individualised and focused on meeting the needs of the children.

It's a conversion of a secure training centre at Medway. It provides small units of accommodation with just a small number of children living together, two large education buildings, and no more than 49 children on site accessing those services. That will create a different culture and ethos, providing access to services differently from in our YOI settings. It really should deliver that step change that we want to see.

But as you described, there's a need to learn. We're already learning from what we've done over recent years, and we've got to make sure some of this learning is short-term and short-timed, and that we continue to develop. There is a full evaluation that we're currently formalising and it will take at least a

three-year period to make sure that we've captured all of the learning we need to inform potential future secure schools. And, if we've introduced secure schools as a fourth sector of delivery, working out its value and looking at how it fits with the other sectors we deliver. So, we are really looking forward to the opening of the school and the change that will bring to the system.

**It will be really interesting to see how it progresses, and to maximise any opportunities to share any learning during that initial three-year period.**

We've got to do that. There's so much to learn from each other, and we've got to do more of that.

**Is there anything that you think the wider organisation could learn from the YCS?**

I think there's lots, and I think it's two-way. If I reflect on my own experiences, I didn't previously know about the unseen parts of the YCS, such as secure children's homes and the individualised care that's provided to our very complex children. I think there's lots to learn that is applicable within an adult setting. There's more that we can share and should share. I think in terms of skills, there are a lot of staff working within the community and in prisons who would do very well to use their skills within the YCS, and in return there are lots of really talented people working within the YCS who could bring their skills and experiences to the wider agency. We're very much part of the wider HMPPS, but we're very much part of the wider youth justice sector as well.

I think the staff that work within our youth custody settings really do go above and beyond, and they're delivering at a high level, working with some of the most complex children in society. But there's a lot we can learn in return; there's such good practice across prisons and probation and across the wider youth sector that we need to bring in to our operations. We know that we have areas, like behaviour management, where we're focused on driving improvement and there's a great deal to learn from education other settings.

I think there is sense in making sure that we lift the veil, that we're communicating clearly what we're about, what we do, and that we're open to new ideas, new thinking, and new partnerships. And we see that movement of staff both within the YCS to different sectors, as well as into and out of the YCS across those different parts, and from that we will deliver the very best outcomes for children.