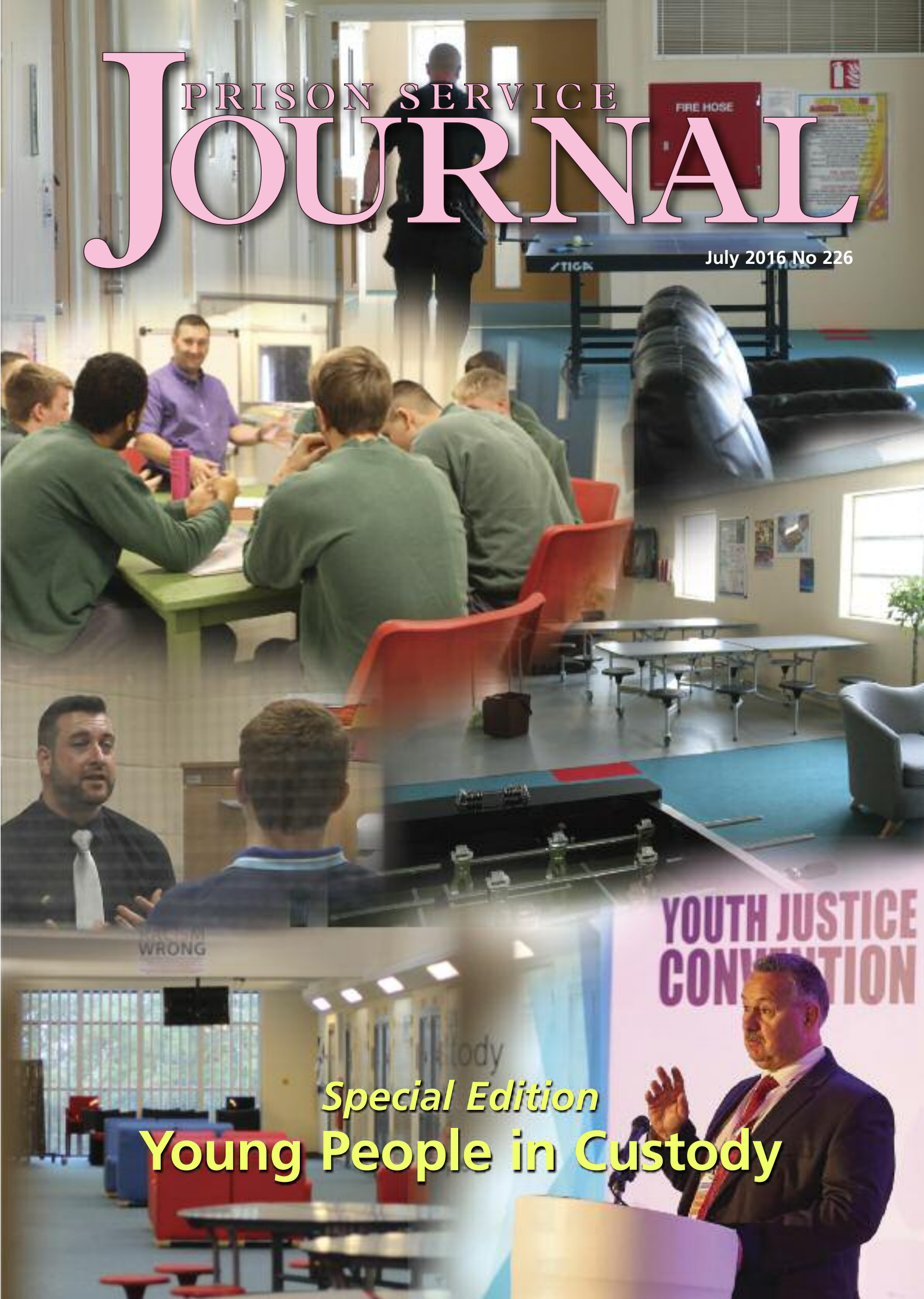
PRISON SERVICE
JOURNAL
July 2016 No 226
FIRE HOSE
YOUTH JUSTICE
WRONG
Special Edition
Young People in Custody

Interview: Pete Gormley, Governor of HM YOI Werrington

Pete Gormley *is Governor of HM YOI Werrington. He is interviewed by* ***Dr Kate Gooch****, Lecturer in Law at the University of Birmingham.*

Pete Gormley is the Governing Governor of HM YOI Werrington, a young offender institution (YOI) accommodating boys aged 15-18 years old. Pete became the Governor in February 2015, having previously been the Deputy Governor at HM YOI Werrington and a number of other functional head posts including the Head of Young People at HMYOI Brinsford.

KG: How is governing a YOI for young people different to governing in other types of establishments?

PG: The main difference is that you hold children in your care and the law is different. It's about their maturity, generally speaking they respond differently to adults so it's understanding firstly the child's specific environment, what the laws are governing children and understanding their maturity and how they are likely to respond.

KG: Have you noticed differences in how children respond compared with young adults or adult prisoners to the same or similar situations?

PG: With children their consequential thinking isn't quite as developed as well as adults, therefore, they tend to react to things a bit more erratically. This could be a behavioural, learning or mental health issue, it could be that they are still immature in terms of their development. I think it is important that staff dealing with children understand that and understand that they are likely to get a different response to what they would do or would expect from a reasonable sort of interaction with an adult. A lot of what we do is understanding the child and understanding the child's mentality, and that's partly why staff working in the young person's environment receive additional training.

KG: How has the role of Governing Governor been different to other roles you have held?

PG: This is my first Governing Governor job so I can't comment on what it is like to be a Governing Governor in other establishment but it's great if I'm honest. It's leading an organisation and being able to — I say set the direction but the direction is very often set for us, so, it's doing as much as I can within that set direction in terms of setting out your own stall and leading how you want with your own personal values, which for me is really enjoyable. I think I understand the business, I think I understand what's best for young people, I think I understand the best way to get the best out of a staff group and if I can lead my SMT like that, it's fantastic opportunity and a very rewarding experience.

KG: It sounds like it's quite rewarding even with all the challenges associated with the role…

PG: It is probably more challenging than I was expecting but I'm still very new and learning my trade so that's fine but equally as rewarding as well. If you can engage an SMT and a staff group to work to set a culture and a work ethic within an establishment that is then really positive and looks after children in an appropriate way giving them an opportunity to turn their lives around, then I think you have the opportunity to really achieving something in this complex environment. Because of the complex needs and sometimes unpredictable nature of the children we look after, it's an environment where stability is frequently under review, and ever changing.

KG: So you've noticed changes with the population itself in the time you've been working with young people?

PG: Yes, I have been working with young people at Werrington now for just short of two years and there's certainly been some changes that I've noticed in that time. Previously, about 2007, I was Head of Young People at another establishment and there's also been some considerable changes since then. It's well-known that there was close to 3,000 under-eighteens in the system and now there's less than a thousand. There's been some really good work around diverting young people away from custody so I guess the ones that are now sent to us are the ones who really need to be in custody. I have heard the term 'thickening of the soup' to describe the population we are now dealing with and that seems an appropriate analogy to me. I guess the difference is that we are seeing more complex children coming into custody with a lot more needs, a lot more vulnerabilities and therefore, need a lot more intervention.

KG: What do you notice has changed around the needs and vulnerabilities of the children in the estate?

PG: It certainly feels that the percentage of children that have complex needs is much higher. I think it's fair to say that most of the children in custody have some form of complex needs and some have got very high levels. Previously, they seemed the minority so they were much easier to manage and deal with because, in terms of

interventions the majority of boys in custody with their vulnerabilities and threats of violence didn't pose too much of a concern and weren't as resource intensive. This certainly feels different now.

KG: What are the main needs when they are coming in now?

PG: Whatever their needs are we try to address and stabilise them, with our priority being to safeguard them. We risk assess the young people to explore their needs and ideally we would like to sequence their interventions. We have implemented 'Transforming Youth Custody' which enables 30 hours of education which is absolutely fantastic for some children and could be the best thing that happened to them because they have a wonderful opportunity to learn, however for others they are not ready or capable of sitting in a classroom. They have far greater needs in terms of anger management issues, withdrawal from substance misuse, maybe vulnerabilities we need to address first before they can survive in a classroom for a longer period. So we need to be really careful about how we assess and sequence what the requirements are of each child. For some children who are so angry, vulnerable, poorly from withdrawal, or have such need for mental health intervention education isn't their priority initially, so the sequencing and the flexibility of resources available is important.

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KG: You have to get young people to a place where they are ready to engage with education?

PG: Yes, Transforming Youth Custody certainly isn't one size fits all. What I need as a Governor is a range of interventions and the flexibility of an individual learning profile or interventions profile for every child that comes through the gate. We never know what we are going to get but the assumption is that we are getting more children with a range of complex needs so what I need is a range of interventions to be able to address these in the right sequence. That shouldn't be about being judged on can I get boys to thirty hours of education a week because that sometimes isn't going to happen and it can take months to get a boy in a position where they are capable of that. What we are suffering from at the moment is putting boys in activities, in education, in vocational courses who aren't quite ready for it, they are becoming disruptive because they are not having their needs addressed.

I believe we are very good at stabilising young people at Werrington, however, this is not enough, just to get them to behave whilst in custody, that's only a very small part of what we are trying to do. What we also want is rehabilitation and if all I achieve is keeping someone occupied whilst in custody, then when I release them into the community, I feel like I have failed.

I think our aim should be to make young people in custody better citizens, so in trying to rehabilitate them they have a real opportunity here at Werrington to go through a process of intervention and education, addressing their behaviour, better themselves and maybe gaining qualifications, some job prospects, which may need to carry on through the gate into the community so they can avoid further offending.

KG: What would you say that the purpose of imprisoning young people is?

PG: Well I guess from a court point of view, it's public protection. They have committed a crime at a level where a court has deemed it necessary to put them in a custodial environment. But of course once they are in prison, it's absolutely our responsibility to give them the best opportunity to turn their lives around and whatever it takes to do that, whether it's just having a relationship with a member of staff who they see as a role model or whether it's through heavy intervention that addresses their criminal behaviour, their mental health or their substances misuse.

KG: How easy is it to reconcile a security function with a rehabilitative function when dealing with children?

PG: It does create challenges. An example of which would be unauthorised articles that come into an establishment, such as illegal substances. These are difficult to control because if you don't get the balance of dealing with children and decency right it leaves you vulnerable to security breaches.

There are lots examples of where we balance decency in dealing with children against the needs of security but we will be very much intelligence focused on how we respond, and when stricter security measures are required we wouldn't want them to become the norm. In dealing with children, you have to make that judgement call and about what's appropriate and if it's dealing with risk, then you judge that risk appropriately, and make a defensible decision.

KG: How do young people tend to present in custody?

PG: Generally speaking they are fine, they will talk and engage with you. There is this perception that some children have to act like prisoners, which we try to break. I'm really keen on role-modelling for my staff and challenging low level anti-social

behaviour and I'm constantly having discussions with children and with staff about what's right, what's wrong.

I encourage pro-social modelling and role model behavioural because if we don't do that in custody and we allow boys to use offensive language and to be rude and disrespectful, then they are just going to do that when they go back into the community. We are trying to demonstrate a decent way to behave. But generally speaking they are okay, they become disruptive when they want to become disruptive, or feel they have no choice, maybe because of their lack of consequential thinking, there are often conflicts which start in the community which continue in custody and some boys feel they can't back down because they are going to lose face, and we have to break down those barriers. We have to do conflict resolution with those boys and we try to demonstrate to them that there are other ways to deal with issues.

KG: Has the nature of the offences young people have committed changed?

PG: It certainly feels like it. Anecdotally, it feels like there are more violent crimes and longer sentences being given out, and it feels like there are more sexually orientated crimes at this age group. That's going back to my point about the need for a range of interventions and the flexibility, but an ideal model that I would like would prove to be quite resource intensive because I would want a range of intervention that might only be used on occasions by a specialist, but of course that isn't an efficient way of operating.

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KG: I've noticed that you refer to them as 'children' rather than 'young people'…

PG: The correct title is 'Young People' but they are under eighteen and in the eyes of the law, they are children. Now there are some quite big, scary children if I'm honest but they are children. When does a child become an adult? In my opinion and in the eyes of the law, it's eighteen but that's not always when a child is capable of being an adult. Some children are adults long before their eighteenth birthday physically without a doubt, mentally maybe not so. I think there's some real work that we need to explore through transitioning back into the community or transitioning into young adults because there are some very vulnerable eighteen year olds who are immature in terms of physical and mental development and we are putting them into adult establishments. We are commissioned by the YJB for children, we are the privileged few and compared to the rest of NOMS, we are well resourced compared. Perhaps that's right to invest that resource with children because children are the future and we want to prevent them from continuing a life in criminality.

This does lead to problems, if we don't get transition right and this person isn't mature enough and we put them straight into an adult or young adult prison which have a lot less resource and support than they have been used to, it's a stark difference, and can add to any vulnerability.

KG: Should we retain the use of YOIs for children and young adults?

PG: Personally I'm a big advocate on retaining them. I think Werrington is a good example, as are the other YPE establishments. They can be very vulnerable and volatile community but because we have the backing of NOMS we get it right. There are lots of things we can do to improve which comes with additional commissioning, additional funding, I think we have the ability to become more flexible and improve what we do in terms of how we configure the estate.

I believe Werrington could develop into a more bespoke, specialist unit where boys' needs are addressed with a range of sequenced interventions but with the realisation that some boys have highly complex needs that will take specialist input.

We need the ability to quickly assess if this young person coming into custody is in such desperate need for interventions, or is going to be sent to a mental health hospital, or that we need an enhanced, specialist unit that's resource intensive, with an integration plan where we can progress them into a normal — if there is such thing as normal — prison setting.

I can probably name ten boys here who fit that criteria and we are currently trying to work with them in a bespoke way, to benefit them and the rest of the establishment because clearly if the people with highly complex needs are just on normal location, and are just going to normal activities then the additional resources and attention that they REQUIRE means that we are paying a lot of attention on the few and that prevents other boys learning in classes, having decent association or interaction in youth clubs.

KG: What do you think the key opportunities and challenges are for the young people's estate?

PG: Certainly the finances. Austerity has been around for a long time now. There's got to be savings at a time when I'm asking for more resources to deal with young people in custody appropriately. So balancing the requirements of the individual and establishment against the budget is absolutely huge and I'm in charge of spending a large proportion of public money wisely so that's the biggest challenge.

And then of course dealing with the children we are getting in and their complex needs and making sure that we do the best job that we can. Reform is coming, we don't know what shape that reform will take. We need to work smarter and more efficiently but at the same time realising that the boys we are dealing with are really complex. I hope that we still lead the way on delivering youth custody but we don't know what that's going to look like and we will adapt accordingly, of course we will.

Not only do I think we can get it right but we can do it cost effectively. Obviously there are the discussions around governor autonomy and devolution, I see these as opportunities but also big challenges. It's a little bit scary too but it sounds great. If I can have more autonomy to make decisions at a local level with the in-depth local knowledge within a framework to make things efficient and better for Werrington and the boys we look after, and the staff that work here — absolutely fantastic.

KG: Running alongside the Michael Gove reforms or potential reforms, you also have the Taylor review — what do you see the opportunities and challenges are with the Taylor review?

PG: I suppose what we need to do is to see what comes out of it first but for me, I'm hoping that it's going to be a real understanding that perhaps compared with when the YJB came into formation, what we are dealing with now is a very different clientele and we need to move and change, we need to commission it in a different way.

Can we do things better and smarter? Of course we can and there's always an opportunity to do that. So I'm hoping that the opportunities that come out of those reviews is an understanding that what we are dealing with in terms of children in custody is very different and we need to move with the times. Should we be moving to what is normalising youth custody? Not mirroring society of course but something close to it so when they go back out, it's not such a stark change. So I'm hoping that that review will bring all those opportunities in a format that we can manage.

KG: What would you say you are most proud of in the last twelve months?

PG: I'm proud of the way my senior team and staffing group have responded to my direction because in turn what that means is that they have presented real opportunities to boys to turn their lives around if they want to. There have been a number of examples in a complex environment where boys have done really well for themselves and they have gone out as success stories. When I'm signing early release and HDCs [Home detention curfews] and you read from the starting point of their criminal career to what they've done, they've turned their lives around. Of course, I'm going to claim that Werrington has been a part of that and even if it's just the catalyst that has made them realise that there is a different way, you can't get anything more satisfying than that. It doesn't work all the time of course and for every success story, there are a number of stories where we need to work harder. I walk around and I'm very proud of the staff when I listen to the way that they talk to and deal with boys — and some very difficult boys as well and they have to put up with a lot of flack and some quite violent situations — their resolve and resilience constantly amazes me.

KG: As an endnote, is there a particular success story that has stuck in your mind that you wanted to end on?

PG: I suppose it would have to involve a child who came to us, who was well known to us, had been in a number of times, and he was a prolific self-harmer. He came back to us probably in the worst state that most of us had seen him for a long time. He was almost unrecognisable. The self-harm was really bad. He was out on escorts to hospital having self-harmed so severely, I think one day he went three times to AandE. Clinical staff in AandE were saying that he needs constant supervision with no privacy because he was so dangerous to himself and of course we were not geared up to look after that so we put him on what we call a constant watch and we tried to move him to a more suitable environment where he had 24 hour healthcare. I guess because of commissioning, we couldn't move him and he stayed with us for a number of weeks until eventually he was assessed for mental health and he was moved to a secure mental hospital. But in that time, from memory it was about six weeks, the staff did an absolutely wonderful job in some really distressing circumstances. To see a child do that to himself, for staff, it was not nice, but they got him off the constant watch, helped him stop self-harming, they reintegrated him back into normal location for a period of time. Yes he bounced back into his ways for a while and thankfully he was assessed and taken into secure accommodation which is where he should be but for that period of time, a number of staff at Werrington did an absolutely wonderful job of looking after that child because he was a real danger to himself and if he wasn't in the custody at that point, I would be really fearful for his life.