

Seven years ago, the Northamptonshire Magistracy started looking at ways to better support the children and young people who appeared before their youth courts. Soon afterwards in 2014, Lord Carlile of Berriew published his Independent Parliamentarians' inquiry into the Operation and Effectiveness of the Youth Court, and spoke to his report at the Northamptonshire Symposium on Youth Justice that same year. During the two years that followed we had the pleasure of working with Mr Charlie Taylor, who at the request of The Lord Chancellor, was conducting a Governmental review of the Youth Justice System. With the Centre for Justice Innovation, Sieff and Nuffield Foundations all supporting youth justice reform, the Northamptonshire Magistracy was innovating and acting at the beginning of a time of change.

We are now launching our third iteration of problem solving thinking: Youth Court Solutions. Built around the ACE¹ model (Adverse Childhood Experiences), knowing any brush with the criminal justice system constitutes an ACE and knowing that approximately 70% of child victims go on to become offenders, Youth Court Solutions is designed to tackle these problems as early as possible, whenever a child or young person comes into contact with a courthouse.

But that is not where we started and the last seven years have been busy.

Judges and Magistrates take a lot of care to ensure the sentences they pass are right and appropriate. Designed to address the offending, though primarily constructed to prevent reoffending while having full regard of the welfare of the child. It therefore comes as no surprise that Sentencers care about the sentences they pass and live in hope that they will make a real and lasting difference. This is true of all sentencing and is fundamentally at the heart of youth justice.

The Northamptonshire Magistracy considered ways that they could inspire, motivate and support the child and young people working under a court order. Starting with letters of congratulation when orders were revoked early due to excellent progress, the idea of offering support throughout the duration of the court order was next. The new and innovative out of court **Youth Review Panel** was born; although unused legislation did sit on the statute books that would have allowed in-court reviews². Specially trained magistrates attend the Panels as guests of the Youth Offending Service, visiting the regular management review meetings. Although the magistrates attend as guests with no formal power, the opportunity for the child, young person and family members to meet the magistrates is seen by them as very significant. The magistrates offer motivation and support but also challenge where appropriate, all for a successful outcome.

In 2014, Lord Carlile's inquiry documented how the various agencies that are required to support a court order were too often working at odds with each other. Over the years, magistrates attending the Youth Review Panels have observed this at first hand. If the reviews were being conducted in court maybe immediate action could have been taken to ensure all agencies properly supported the child or young person under the order of the court. Previous experience of such difficulties meant we had

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmsctech/506/50605.htm>

² <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/4/schedule/1/paragraph/35>

long since resurrected a little used piece of legislation.³ This ensured all agencies, who would be charged with a duty or responsibility by the court, were fully engaged in the sentencing and subsequent processes.

The second iteration of building our problem solving environment was to consider how the court sentencing hearing could proactively engage the broad range of professionals so often needed to work together in really complex cases. When the possible complexities are proactively recognised a **Problem Solving Hearing** is listed and all professionals who will have a responsibility for delivering any element of the court order is requested to attend court. In court, each professional is engaged by the presiding justice to declare what they propose to do and how they intend to deliver. To support understanding the presiding justice will ensure there is clarity on behalf of all attending professionals, the child or young person and their family. The basis of this broad understanding will form the backbone of the court order under law.

Which brings us up to date and the launching of our third iteration of our **Problem Solving Culture: Youth Court Solutions**.

The vast majority of children and young people who offend are often living with other difficulties far outside their own control. The vast majority have also been victims of crime or some other kind of abuse before finding themselves before the court for their own wrongdoing. Likewise, often the other children or young people involved as either victims, witnesses or even as the siblings of those involved, are also living with tremendous difficulties badly influencing their lives and seriously restricting their opportunities in life. Building on our post-court reviews and in-court problem solving hearings, we have turned our efforts to an at-court service to help tackle these underlying problems.

Youth Court Solutions, our at-court advice and support service, will launch in pilot form this autumn and will operate with the kind permission of HMCTS from the offices in the public area of the Wellingborough courthouse. Delivered by a range of local charities⁴ and coordinated by The Crysals Foundation⁵ working in conjunction with the Youth Offending Service, Police and, where necessary, the legal profession. It will aim to ensure that all young visitors have their broader problems addressed offering access to a wide range of services for their clients, children and young people and their families. This may include;

- help to identify and access local authority, statutory or third sector support services to address the issues which bring children and young people to court;
- introductions to learning and training opportunities to improve employment opportunities;
- practical support with financial issues and accommodation;
- information on the working of the criminal justice system.

Northamptonshire Youth Court Solutions enjoys the enthusiastic support of The Lieutenancy; The Shrievalty; the Magistracy and Senior Judiciary; the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner; the Police; HMCTS; the Centre for Justice Innovation; and many others.

Due to go live on 12th January 2021, Youth Court Solutions, the at-court advice and support service will work broadly to provide a supportive and stable environment for the child or young person and, as a consequence, an enhanced prospect for the child or young person of living a life free from the impact of crime, whether as a witness, victim or perpetrator thereby also creating long-term savings for the whole justice system.

Every child deserves the chance of a happy future.

³ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1969/54/section/9>

⁴ <https://www.servicesix.co.uk>

⁵ <https://crysals.org>