

Communities and Culture Committee

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Committee Inquiry into Youth Justice in Wales - evidence gathering - Julie Morgan MP

What action should the Welsh Assembly Government take to improve the experience of Welsh children in secure estate?

Children in the secure estate from Wales should be housed in Wales. By sending children away from their families to institutions in England, we risk harming their family contact and their reform and rehabilitation. The All Wales Youth Offending Strategy Delivery Plan calls for an increase in accommodation for young people in Wales and I agree with this. In April 2009 the Strategy update estimates that 57% of young people sentenced in Wales could find accommodation in Wales. This is a huge improvement but still woefully low. It has also taken eight years to achieve, a similar timescale to raise the figure to 100% would be unacceptable.

How effectively does the All Wales Youth Offending Strategy address issues to do with the secure estate?

Custody of children and young people should always be the last resort and the Strategy makes this clear. The Strategy also indicates that greater provision of community sentences should be considered. It is important that these are both constructive and effective, and should not be designed simply as an excuse "not to" incarcerate children and young people.

What particular problems are there in implementation and the delivery of support services for children and young people in the secure estate, including mental health provision, support for education and resettlement services?

There are numerous problems related to being kept away from a home area. It is difficult to keep contact. Once a person is returned to their area there can also then be a problem for them to reintegrate and resettle in to the society they left. Within the secure estate there is also a notorious lack of psychiatric support, this is always of concern but especially so with children and young people

To what extent is the Welsh Assembly Government's "rights based agenda", in its support to children and young people, delivered to Welsh children in the secure estate?

Do specific groups of children and young people need additional support e.g. BME groups, young people with a disability or learning impairment, Welsh speakers, young carers, and girls and young women?

Yes. The more the system can react to those in custody as being individuals the better it will be. Of special concern to me is the treatment of girls and young women. They make up a tiny, tiny minority of those in the secure estate and are frequently very different from their male counterparts. In order to make their rehabilitation more effective they need a radically different system than that put in place for young male offenders. Whilst custody should be the last resort for all young people, for young women and girls it is especially problematic. Equally as there are so few girls in custody there are far fewer institutions to house them meaning distances from families tend to be longer. As already discussed this can cause difficulties for the young person in custody and decrease the likelihood of thorough rehabilitation.

What further action is needed to reduce use of custody and to promote alternative measures to detention for children in conflict with the law?

More should be available in terms of intensive fostering. I had experience of this whilst working in West Glamorgan where I started the first family placement scheme in Wales for teenagers presenting problems (including offenders). This involved giving help and support to the family concerned. Support was designed to be available at all times from a family placement officer. My first hand experience was that the response from the young people involved was very good.

Also a pilot scheme in Hampshire which is being run by Action for Children in conjunction with the Youth Justice Board suggests that a system such as this in place of a custodial sentence can be an effective means to prevent re-offending. This kind of practice is more widespread in the USA and is reported as being more effective than custody. In the pilot program, it is reported that approximately half of children who go into the program complete it. In the US it is reported that 65% of those who complete the program do better in terms of education and re-offending than those who have received a standard custodial sentence.

How effective are arrangements for implementation and the delivery of provisions that blend reserved and devolved functions?

Should responsibility for the secure estate be devolved to Wales?

I feel that the devolution of responsibility for the secure estate should be considered.

Are there any specific recommendations you think should be considered as part of this inquiry?

Public perception of the secure estate is of concern. There seems to be a wide belief that custody is the only 'real' way to punish a crime. Community sentences in particular are often viewed with derision and presented in the press as being a soft touch. If this is passed on to those who are potential offenders it could reduce the deterrent impact of the punishment. As such, a greater public awareness of the real face of the secure estate and other punishments may serve to make them more effective. If custody is to be the last resort, it's important that those faced with it do not view it as an easy ride.