

# Children and young people on the margins:

## Engagement Findings

October 2024



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# 1. Engagement Summary

The following engagement summary offers an overview of the engagement programme design, delivery, and key findings.

## Background

1. The Children, Young People and Education Committee is conducting an inquiry into children and young people on the margins, which in summary relates to missing children and those vulnerable to criminal exploitation.
2. The Committee wished to hear directly from young people who have been criminally exploited. The Citizen Engagement Team facilitated interviews with young people who have survived criminal exploitation. The experiences of the young people have been compiled into a short film. This report summarises the perspectives shared by the young people featured in the short film.
3. The views and experiences of the young people were anonymised and portrayed by actors in a short film. The film will be shown to the Committee on 6 November 2024.
4. Please be advised that this report and the film include discussions of criminal exploitation and contain content that some readers may find upsetting.

## Objectives

5. The objective of the interviews was to gather the views and experiences of young people who had previously been criminally exploited.
6. Views were gathered to ensure that those with lived experience contributed to the evidence-gathering programme, with specific focus on the following inquiry terms of reference:
  - Nature and scale: across Wales and regional variations (e.g. traditional, drug-related, sexual, financial).
  - At-risk groups: including care experience, children experiencing trauma in the home, and some groups of children who are



- Practice: Approaches to prevention, community resilience, early intervention, support provided and exit strategies for victims. Practice issues such as information sharing and data collection.
- Devolved and UK powers: How joined up is the interface between devolved and non-devolved policies such as criminal and youth justice. Are there any points of tension between criminal law and safeguarding.

## Methodology

**7.** Interviews were held over the phone or face-to-face. Participants chose the mode of interview most convenient for them. The format of engagement was largely comparable between sessions but varied slightly to meet participants' needs and facilitate an organic, qualitative conversation.

## Participants

**8.** Five young people and two parents from South Wales were interviewed. To protect participant anonymity, further information will not be published.

## Ethical Considerations

**9.** Safeguarding and maintaining the anonymity of participants were of paramount importance. Each young person involved in the interviews was accompanied by a youth worker or support worker, who provided support both during and after the interview. All interview notes were anonymised to protect the identities of participants, and each interview's output was reviewed and approved by both the participant and their support worker before being included in the report and film. This process ensured that participants felt safe and supported at every stage of their involvement.

**10.** All methods used in this project adhered to the standards set out in the Market Research Society Code of Conduct and complied with relevant data protection and safeguarding legislation to ensure the ethical treatment and privacy of all participants.

## Key Findings

**11.** The engagement findings in this report shed light on the experiences of young people who have been criminally exploited and the factors that made them vulnerable. Participants described how family issues, such as a lack of stable parental support, poverty, and neurodivergence, often left them at risk. They explained that when children lack supervision or structure at home, they

become more visible targets for those who seek to exploit them. For instance, one young person noted that kids “left on the streets all day” can be easily identified by others as having little parental involvement or care.

**12.** The young people also talked about how criminal gangs target vulnerable youth, gradually drawing them in by providing a false sense of belonging. Gangs often exploit emotional needs, acting as “father figures” or mentors to children who may lack stable support. Participants explained that involvement starts with small tasks and can quickly escalate, leaving them trapped in a cycle of dependency and debt. These young people expressed feeling “trapped” in a lifestyle that offered them respect and purpose they did not find elsewhere yet left them unable to break free due to fear and obligation.

**13.** Another significant theme was the role of schools and social services. Schools were seen as crucial places for detecting early signs of trouble, yet some participants noted that inconsistent support and punitive measures, like reduced timetables, can make things worse. Social services, meanwhile, were often viewed with distrust; some participants described social workers who were either absent or failed to deliver promised support. They emphasised the need for more tailored, reliable services that build trust over time, rather than short-term or procedural approaches.

**14.** Overall, the participants underscored the need for more compassionate, long-term support from both social services and law enforcement. They advocated for a system that understands their unique challenges and offers proactive interventions. By addressing these areas, they believe that many young people could be protected from exploitation and given a better chance to lead stable, positive lives.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement, particularly the young people who spoke with maturity and dignity.

## 2. Engagement Findings

This section outlines the key themes, views, and solutions expressed by the people interviewed.

**16.** At the end of some of the themes below, we present a collection of solutions suggested by participants during the engagement sessions. These suggestions reflect the creativity and concerns of our participants. All solutions can be found in Annex 1.

### The Vulnerable

**17.** This theme explores the vulnerabilities that increase the risk of certain children being targeted for exploitation. Factors such as family instability, poverty, neurodivergence, and insufficient parental support emerged as significant contributors. Young participants highlighted the profound impact of family dynamics and the presence, or absence, of parental involvement on children's exposure to risk. Many expressed concerns over the lack of parental supervision, often leaving children vulnerable to exploitation and negative influences. They described environments where parents, sometimes struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues, failed to provide necessary care and attention. However, some participants also noted that their mothers, in particular, did everything they could despite limited resources, highlighting that not all parents face the same challenges.

**18.** One participant shared:

*“Too many kids are left on the streets all day, putting them in the spotlight. It’s the kids out there unsupervised who get noticed. People can tell their parents don’t really care.”*

**19.** Another participant recounted their experience with instability and lack of care during their teenage years:

*“When I was 16, I was put in a hostel. I was responsible for myself but shouldn’t have been. I should have been a looked-after child, but social services never helped me. I had all of the responsibilities of being older but none of the freedoms. I had to pay rent, put food in my freezer, I had to keep my room clean, I had to do my washing—that’s a lot of responsibility for a 16-*

*year-old. From the age of 16 to 17, I don't remember a day when I wasn't depressed. I took drugs in the hostel, acid, ecstasy, 2CB, I ended up doing sniff in hostel—it was just a bad place for me."*

**20.** The participants emphasised that children in these circumstances lack essential security and boundaries at home, with little to no accountability. This lack of structure, they argued, makes it clear to others that these children are unsupervised and at risk. Some suggested a need for social services to play a more active role, with early intervention to support families where parents may be unable or unwilling to provide appropriate care.

**21.** Parents facing personal disabilities and mental health challenges, such as ADHD, PTSD, and neurodivergence, also highlighted the ongoing struggle for support. One parent shared:

*"My kids have got ADD and Autism. I've got ADHD and PTSD. I would like the weight lifted off my shoulders, not in a way where someone is gonna carry me but in a way where I'm not begging for support that should have already been in place. My mental health is suffering, which is gonna have a knock-on effect on my children, I feel like a robot, I don't feel like a person." (Parent)*

**22.** Overall, the feedback underscored the importance of engaged parenting in providing children with a sense of stability and protection, and the potential for social services to be effective in the lives of those at risk. Young people suggested that proactive and compassionate approaches from support services could significantly reduce the likelihood of children falling into exploitative situations.

## **Targeting and Manipulation by Criminal Gangs**

**23.** The young people described a common pattern in which criminal gangs target and manipulate vulnerable youth, gradually pulling them into a life of crime. They emphasised that this recruitment process is not random but deliberate, relying on the gang's awareness of the local area and identification of children who appear isolated or unsupervised. The gang members watch these kids over time, assessing which ones are likely to be receptive to their influence. One participant shared:

*"...it's through...watching and getting to know the kids over time, that's when they make their decision based on the kids where no one's interested in them or nothing. It's all about how*

*you portray yourself, cos if you look vulnerable they'll take a chance."*

**24.** According to the participants, gangs often exploit the emotional needs of these young people, presenting themselves as father figures or caring mentors to children who may lack stable family support. This false sense of belonging and care entices many young people into gang life. Once involved, the youth are drawn deeper through small tasks and favours, which quickly escalate into more serious criminal activities. As one individual noted, the gangs start by "*giving you something... you think it's free but it's not.*" Gradually, a cycle of debt, obligation, and dependency is created, making it increasingly difficult for the young person to leave.

**25.** Many young participants expressed feeling trapped by this cycle, noting that gang involvement provides a sense of respect and purpose they may not find elsewhere. However, as they become further entrenched, their options diminish, and they often feel too compromised to seek help. These insights reveal the sophisticated methods gangs use to lure and control vulnerable youth, underscoring the need for early intervention and supportive services that address these underlying emotional and social needs.

## School

**26.** The role of schools in identifying and addressing vulnerabilities among students emerged as a central theme in the interviews. Participants underscored the critical importance of early intervention by educators, who are often in the best position to notice behavioural changes indicative of external risks. They emphasised that schools are not merely educational institutions but also key environments where issues related to safety and well-being can be detected and addressed. One participant explained,

*"You have to look for it in school, it all stems from school... You'll definitely see changes if there's something going on outside, so that's the best place to pick it up."*

**27.** The participants highlighted, however, that the effectiveness of intervention depends on the approach taken by the school and individual teachers. They noted that schools vary widely in their level of commitment to supporting at-risk students. In some cases, schools quickly pass concerns onto authorities, which can create a sense of fear and mistrust among students. As one participant put it:

*“It all comes down to the teacher... You need the right kind of teacher, not just anyone who’s been hired, you need a special team.”*

**28.** Another recurring issue was the practice of placing struggling students on reduced timetables, which some participants felt increased their exposure to danger. When young people are out in the community while their peers are in school, they may be more easily targeted by those seeking vulnerable recruits. As one individual shared,

*“Reduced timetables got to stop, even if those kids have to go to special lessons or do work experience or learn skills or something, just to chuck them on the street and say, ‘Fuck you, fend for yourself’ that’s a...joke!”*

**29.** The young people’s insights suggest that while schools have the potential to play a protective role, certain policies and practices may inadvertently put vulnerable students at greater risk. They called for more compassionate and supportive approaches within schools, particularly for those students who may be most susceptible to external influences.

## **Solutions**

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- Reduce reliance on practices like reduced timetables, which may increase young people’s exposure to external risks.
- Train school staff to recognise and respond effectively to signs of exploitation, enabling timely and appropriate interventions.

## **Social Services and Support**

**30.** Participants expressed significant concerns about the effectiveness of current support systems for vulnerable youth, emphasising that inconsistent or impersonal approaches can hinder rather than help. Many described experiences of neglect or inadequate support from social services, with some feeling that social workers were more focused on fulfilling bureaucratic obligations than on offering meaningful assistance.

**31.** One young person shared a troubling encounter with their social worker:

*“My social worker tried to gaslight me into saying that my mother hit me and my brother. My mum’s never laid hands on*

*me, and I'm not having my little brother going into care cos a [social worker] doesn't know how to do her job."*

**32.** For some parents, interactions with social services exacerbated their difficulties rather than alleviating them. One parent recounted the impact of fleeing domestic violence:

*"I've been through domestic violence where both my children were affected. I did everything that the people from the system, Police and Social Services, told me to do. We were in a hostel for about four months—it's the worst situation to put two children in. We were then put into temporary housing with rats and mould. We were moved about in different temporary housing for a long time. That's when my son was living with different family members and ended up in the hostel at 16." (Parent)*

**33.** Another parent shared frustration with the lack of follow-through from a social worker who failed to deliver on promises of support:

*"We had a pretend social worker; it might as well be AI. If you look at the paperwork, we had one, but she wasn't active. She just didn't turn up. We found out she wasn't our social worker four months after she stopped coming. She promised so much with funding and support, like helping to sort out PIP, funding for work clothes cos he wants to go into construction, but she never did any of it." (Parent)*

**34.** Participants conveyed a sense of distrust towards social services, describing how unreliable or absent support worsened their circumstances. They emphasised the need for tailored, long-term support that acknowledges each individual's unique challenges and builds trust over time. Young people and parents alike expressed frustration with what they felt were tokenistic or short-term interventions. Many stressed that building trust with vulnerable families is a gradual process requiring sustained commitment, and they argued that a lack of consistent, compassionate support can leave families feeling abandoned and reluctant to engage with these services.

**35.** Participants also highlighted the importance of empathy and continuity in support services. They called for social workers who demonstrate genuine investment in their well-being, rather than those perceived as transient or indifferent. As one young person noted:

*"It's not enough to just try to help a kid for a few weeks and then move on. You've got to put in the time to understand what's going on in their lives. Building that trust doesn't happen overnight."*

**36.** These experiences underscore the need for more personalised, reliable, and empathetic approaches within support services. By prioritising sustained and individualised support, social services could foster trust and provide meaningful assistance to those attempting to navigate difficult situations.

## **Solutions**

- Increase the proactive role of social services in supporting families, especially those dealing with substance abuse, mental health challenges, or disabilities.
- Focus social services on trust-based, sustained support rather than short-term interventions, to build a solid foundation for at-risk youth and their families.

## **Police and the Law**

**37.** Participants expressed strong opinions on the role of law enforcement in addressing crime, particularly in how police focus their efforts on young people rather than the higher-level individuals orchestrating criminal activities. Many felt that the current approach misplaces emphasis on minor players, such as children or young people, rather than those at the top who manage operations from a distance. As one participant explained,

*"Police need to go after the right people and not the kids... all it takes is a phone to control the whole operation from one place. They'll go to the kids to try and find the route and phone numbers or text messages. But that never leads to nothing."*

**38.** Many discussed how gangs strategically use youth to transport money or drugs, knowing that law enforcement often targets these lower-level individuals. By focusing on vulnerable kids, the police risk putting them in greater danger from both the criminal networks they serve and law enforcement itself. Another participant explained the impact of this pressure, saying:

*"The police are taking the wrong approach. Going after the kids and getting the kids scared isn't really gonna do much... policing that way can put a kid in danger."*

**39.** Participants advocated for a shift in policing strategies, suggesting that officers need to invest time in understanding local communities and focusing on those who are truly orchestrating criminal activities. They expressed frustration with the legal system's inefficiencies, noting that many high-level offenders continue to evade justice. As one participant commented, *"There's big names that should be put away... But the law doesn't work like that, and you can't just put them away,"* underscoring a perceived gap between the legal process and effective crime prevention.

**40.** Participants also described how interactions with law enforcement can often be harsh and dehumanising, intensifying their distrust. One young person shared a traumatic incident that occurred when they were only 11 years old:

*"There was an incident when I was 11. I kicked off and saw red. I was pinned down by six police officers, one on each limb and two on my shoulders. They stripped me naked in the police van to search me and then sectioned me in a mental hospital for adults cos they did not know what to do with me. It was humiliating."*

**41.** Such experiences not only left them feeling humiliated but also reinforced feelings of vulnerability, as they perceived law enforcement to be unprepared to manage their needs in a compassionate or age-appropriate manner.

**42.** Participants recommended initiatives within schools to introduce children to local law enforcement early on, hoping that such efforts could help bridge the trust gap between police and the community. This feedback highlights a need for a more targeted, community-focused approach to law enforcement—one that prioritises high-level offenders and fosters cooperation with young people, rather than criminalising them.

## Solutions

- Prioritise law enforcement efforts on high-level offenders in criminal operations rather than on vulnerable youth involved at lower levels.
- Strengthen relationships between police and communities to build trust and improve cooperation with young people.
- Prevent the criminalisation of vulnerable youth by promoting a supportive and understanding approach in law enforcement.

## Getting Out

**43.** The challenge of leaving a criminal lifestyle was a prominent theme among participants, who described substantial obstacles to breaking free and starting anew. They noted that leaving often requires drastic measures, such as relocating, to ensure safety and sever ties with negative influences. However, even with physical distance, fear of retaliation and distrust can persist. One participant shared:

*"It's hard to get out because you're known and you've got a history... You've got to safeguard yourself even going around wearing a stab-proof vest. Things should be put in place to make it easier for a person of such high status to get out."*

**44.** Participants emphasised that without reliable support, the cycle of criminal activity can feel impossible to escape. Rehoming was identified as one of the most effective ways to help young people break away from these environments. Many spoke of the importance of being removed from the immediate area where they were involved in criminal activity, explaining that if they remained in their original neighbourhoods, the risk of being drawn back in or targeted by former associates was constant. One individual noted:

*"I've been rehomed and it was one of the primary reasons I was able to get out... nobody will ever be able to get out of it as long as they're living in that circle and everyone knows where they live because they'll live in constant fear."*

**45.** They also highlighted the need for long-term, consistent support to help those trying to leave a criminal lifestyle. Participants expressed frustration with social workers and other support services that often fail to build trust or provide ongoing assistance. One participant explained,

*"Kids need special help to get out. Social workers are useless; they don't care... it will take a lot to get some kids out cos they're in so deep it's dangerous if they try and leave."*

**46.** Many described the difficulties of moving forward when a criminal record continues to affect them. One participant explained how their past actions have become a barrier to employment, despite efforts to change:

*"I was in and out of cells when I was younger. Cos I've been in trouble with the police, on paper I'm seen as a risk. I can take control of my emotions now. I'm trying to get a job, I got*

*interviews but I just can't get one. After one interview they told me they couldn't take me on because of my criminal record."*

**47.** These insights reveal the complexities of escaping a criminal lifestyle, illustrating that successful intervention requires personalised, consistent, and sometimes drastic measures, such as relocation. Participants emphasised that without a patient and understanding support system, many young people feel they have nowhere to turn, underscoring the need for a compassionate and long-term approach to aid in these transitions.

## **Solutions**

- Implement rehoming and relocation strategies to help young people involved in criminal activities break free from negative influences.
- Provide consistent, long-term support that builds trust and addresses ongoing safety concerns for those leaving criminal lifestyles.
- Facilitate applications for criminal record expungement where appropriate to remove barriers to lawful employment.

# Annex 1: Solutions

In this section, we present a collection of ideas suggested by participants during the engagement sessions. These ideas represent diverse perspectives aimed at improving the current situation.

**48.** The following solutions were proposed by participants during discussions as potential pathways for positive change and are shared here to inspire further dialogue and consideration.

## School

1. Reduce reliance on practices like reduced timetables, which may increase young people's exposure to external risks.
2. Train school staff to recognise and respond effectively to signs of exploitation, enabling timely and appropriate interventions.

## Social Services

3. Increase the proactive role of social services in supporting families, especially those dealing with substance abuse, mental health challenges, or disabilities.
4. Focus social services on trust-based, sustained support rather than short-term interventions, to build a solid foundation for at-risk youth and their families.

## Policing

5. Prioritise law enforcement efforts on high-level offenders in criminal operations rather than on vulnerable youth involved at lower levels.
6. Strengthen relationships between police and communities to build trust and improve cooperation with young people.
7. Prevent the criminalisation of vulnerable youth by promoting a supportive and understanding approach in law enforcement.

## Getting Out

8. Implement rehoming and relocation strategies to help young people involved in criminal activities break free from negative influences.
9. Provide consistent, long-term support that builds trust and addresses ongoing safety concerns for those leaving criminal lifestyles.
10. Facilitate applications for criminal record expungement where appropriate to remove barriers to lawful employment.

## Annex 2: Interview Questions

The following interview questions served as a flexible guide for the interviewer and were not all asked of each participant.

**49.** The interviews were participant-led, allowing for an organic conversation flow; questions were not presented in a specific order or exact wording but were used to facilitate discussion based on the participants' responses and needs.

### Empowerment and Support for Survivors

- a. It's important for survivors to feel believed and supported. Do you think this happens and if not what needs to be done?
- b. What do you think could be done to create safe spaces where survivors can share their stories without being judged?
- c. Does the counselling and mental health support that's available to help someone recover work and how can it be improved?

### Trauma-Informed Care:

- d. How well do services currently understand trauma when helping survivors recover? What could they do better to provide more effective support?
- e. What makes a space feel safe and supportive for survivors right now? What changes could make these spaces even better for survivors to feel heard and respected?

### Education and Prevention:

- f. How well are children currently being taught about their rights and personal boundaries? What could be improved to prevent exploitation more effectively?
- g. How is awareness about exploitation being raised in schools and communities right now? What more could be done to improve this?

- h. What are parents and carers currently learning about spotting signs of abuse? How could this education be improved to help them recognise the signs earlier?

#### Early Intervention and Family Support:

- i. How well are schools and healthcare providers identifying children at risk of exploitation today? What could be done to improve early detection?
- j. What types of support (such as for poverty or addiction) are families struggling with getting right now? How could this support be improved to better prevent exploitation?

#### Enhancing Online Safety:

- k. Are the current online safety lessons working well to protect young people from online grooming and exploitation? How could they be improved?
- l. What additional steps could be taken to better protect young people from online dangers?

#### Community Involvement in Prevention:

- m. How well are communities currently involved in preventing exploitation? What could communities do better to help stop exploitation?
- n. What do teachers and community leaders currently know about spotting signs of exploitation? What more do they need to learn to act more effectively?

#### Legal Changes and Accountability:

- o. How effective are the current laws in protecting people from exploitation? What specific changes do you think would improve them?
- p. How well are the police and justice system enforcing these laws now? What improvements could be made to make sure they do a better job?

- q. What is currently being done to hold people accountable for exploitation? What more could be done to make sure those responsible face proper consequences?

#### Accessing support:

- r. When you needed help, what information was there, and how did you find out about it?
  - i. How did you first hear about the support or service?
  - ii. Did someone tell you about it? Who?
  - iii. Did you search for help yourself, or did you know about it already?
  - s. What challenges did you face in getting help?
  - iv. How did it feel when you first accessed support?
  - v. Do you feel the same way about it now?
  - vi. Were there any problems or difficulties that made it hard to get help?
- t. What do you think would stop criminal exploitation and help young people who go missing?
- vii. What would have helped you more when you were going through this?