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The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

YOTs' Adaptations and
Challenges to Service
Delivery: A national picture

Research Paper 4

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April 2022

About this Research

During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, there will be societal implications for all children. However, for those in the youth justice system the impacts are likely to be particularly detrimental. There is an urgent need to develop a clear understanding of the impact of the pandemic on these children and those who work with them.

This research is funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). It is led by Professor Hannah Smithson at the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) in partnership with the Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ). The project focuses on each stage of the youth justice system. It will document the impact of the pandemic on adaptations to working practices, barriers and enablers to effective practice, children's experiences and views of these adaptations, and the lessons learned for policy and practice. In June 2021, we published a research paper focusing on the adaptations to practice and service delivery made by Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) across the Greater Manchester region (GM) (Smithson et al, 2021).¹ It drew attention to the digital divide, the challenges of engaging children remotely, and the short-term challenges for YOTs in a post-covid world. This current paper, the fourth of a series of papers to be produced over the life of the project, expands on the original paper. It incorporates the findings of a national online survey undertaken with YOTs in England and Wales. It was completed by YOT professionals between October and November 2021 and was made available in English and Welsh. The aim of the survey was to gauge the views and experiences of youth justice professionals about the impact of Covid-19 on their practice and service delivery, including remote working, safeguarding concerns, and views on the challenges for the youth justice system (YJS) in a post-covid world. Separate, but similar surveys were developed to reflect the differing frequency and timings of lockdowns and restrictions in England and Wales throughout the pandemic. In total, the survey was completed by 433 youth justice practitioners from 89 (58%) of YOTs in England and Wales.

In addition to the findings from the survey, this paper provides accounts from children working with GM YOTs during the pandemic. We worked with 40 children in total between May to December 2021, 12 of whom were subject to community orders. The 12 are all male and aged between 16 and 18, half of whom self-identified as having ethnic minority heritage. Each of them had received an out of court disposal or an intensive supervision and surveillance order, either prior to or during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The children worked with us as part of a series of participatory workshops that were hosted in different venues across the GM region. A film co-created with these children and a further group of children in custody will be available from April 2022 on the MCYS website.

¹ The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Research-Briefing-GM-YOTs-Adaptations-to-Practice.pdf (mmu.ac.uk)

About the Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS)

The MCYS is an award-winning interdisciplinary research centre at MMU, specialising in participatory, youth-informed research that positively influences the lives of young people. MCYS believes young people should have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them and employs participatory approaches to engage with young people across a range of issues. As an interdisciplinary research centre, the MCYS team brings together academics and practitioners from a range of disciplines. In addition to collaborating with young people and their communities, MCYS works with agencies and organisations across the public, private and voluntary sectors, both in the UK and internationally.

About the Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ)

The AYJ brings together over 70 organisations, advocating for and with children to drive positive change in youth justice in England and Wales. Members range from large national charities and advocacy organisations to numerous smaller grassroots and community organisations. The AYJ advocates for distinct systems, services and support that treat children as children first and foremost - underpinned by social justice, children's rights and a focus on positive long-term outcomes. The AYJ aims to promote widespread understanding about the underlying causes of children coming to the attention of the criminal justice system, and champions approaches that enable them to reach their full potential.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank all our colleagues who took part in the interviews. We would also like to thank the AYJ team: Pippa Goodfellow, Millie Harris and Millie Hall, and members of the project steering group: Shadae Cazeau, Kay Davies, Iman Haji and Hazel Williamson, for their invaluable input and support.

Glossary of Acronyms

- Alliance for Youth Justice (AYJ)
- Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
- Greater Manchester (GM)
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP)
- Intensive Supervision and Surveillance (ISS)
- Manchester Centre for Youth Studies (MCYS)
- Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)
- Out of Court Disposals (OOCd)
- Referral Order (RO)
- United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI)
- Youth Custody Service (YCS)
- Youth Justice Board (YJB)
- Youth Justice System (YJS)
- Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

Key Findings

1. Over half of staff from English and Welsh YOTs stated that their YOT had responded 'very well' to the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. The majority of YOT staff in England and Wales used remote methods of working during the early stages of the pandemic.
3. Only a minority of YOT staff in England and Wales have returned to work from a dedicated YOT office.
4. Children's responses across GM about their experiences of remote contact with their YOT worker were mixed.
5. English and Welsh YOTs reported a decrease in children's referrals to specialist services during the early stages of the pandemic. There is some evidence to suggest that referrals are increasing.
6. English and Welsh YOTs reported a decrease in access to interventions for children during the early stages of the pandemic.
7. English and Welsh YOT staff reported a change in children's offending behaviour/s during the pandemic with increases in domestic violence, drug use and child criminal exploitation (CCE).
8. The biggest challenges for YOTs in England and Wales in a post-Covid world are: the balance between remote and office working, children's mental health and staff support.

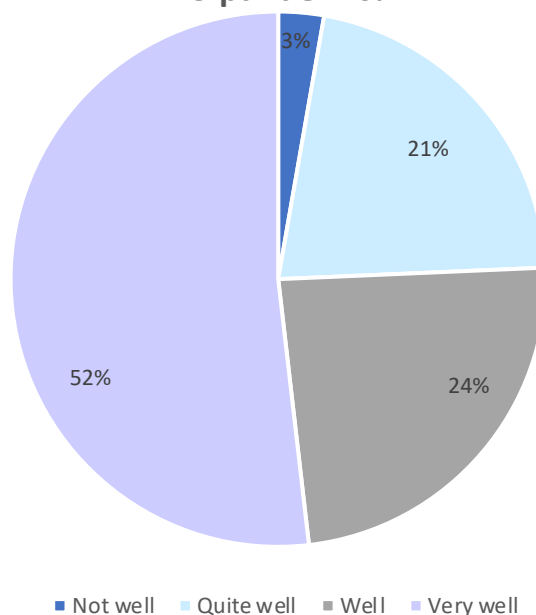
The survey clearly demonstrates that the majority of practitioners reverted to remote delivery during the first stages of the pandemic. While this has decreased somewhat, the majority of practitioners are still not working from a YOT office. While work from home directives were adhered to, the pros and cons of remote work was a recurring theme throughout the survey responses. While viewed as being positive by the majority of YOT staff, remote/hybrid working was also viewed as one of the most significant challenges faced by YOTs across England and Wales. The responses from a group of children involved in the project also demonstrate mixed views about the preference and value of face-to-face and remote working.

The National YOT Survey: Response Rates

England

The English survey yielded a 57% response rate: 76 out of 134 YOTs responded, with 347 individual responses. The majority, 63%, of respondents were YOT practitioners and case managers. 41% of respondents had worked for their respective YOT for over 10 years, whilst a quarter had been in post less than 2 years. 22% of respondents reported having to shield at the beginning of the pandemic and during subsequent lockdowns. Over half (52%) of staff from English YOTs stated that their YOT had responded 'very well' to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1 (n=218)
How well would you say your YOS responded to the Covid-19 pandemic?



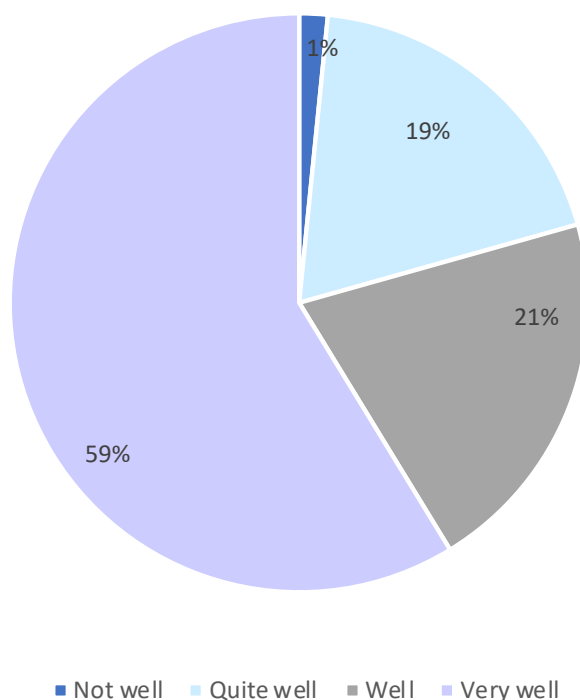
Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey* (MCYS, Nov 2021)

Wales

The Welsh survey yielded a 76% response rate: 13 out of 17 YOTs responded, with 86 individual responses.* The majority, 64% of respondents were YOT managers and case managers. 43% had worked for their respective YOT between 3 and 10 years, 33% had worked for the YOT for over 10 years, whilst 24% had been in post less than 2 years. 27% of respondents (23 individuals) reported having to shield, mainly during the initial period of lockdown. Over half (59%) of staff from Welsh YOTs stated that their YOT had responded 'very well' to the Covid-19 pandemic.

*Care should be taken when using % as n = < 100.

Figure 2 (n=63)
How well would you say your YOS responded to the Covid-19 pandemic?



Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in Wales survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

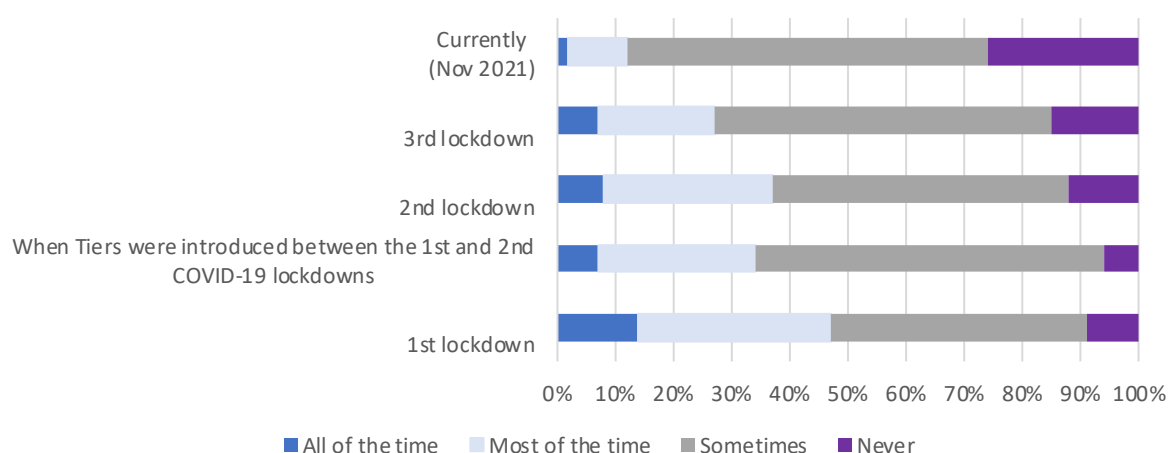
The National Picture: YOTs' adaptations and responses during the Covid-19 pandemic

Remote Working

Findings from the paper published in June 2021 (see Smithson et al, June 2021)² illustrated that YOTs across the GM region had responded quickly and with agility to adapting service delivery and provision throughout the different stages of the pandemic. GM YOT staff had mixed views about the appropriateness and efficacy of remote service delivery with children. At the time of the publication of the June 2021 paper, service provision and delivery had not resumed to pre-covid levels and many YOT offices remained closed.

At a national level, findings from the English survey illustrate that during the first lockdown, 47% of staff in English YOTs reported using remote (i.e. Zoom and WhatsApp) contact methods, including all or most of the time. By November 2021 only 12% of staff were using remote methods of contact all or most of the time, with 62% of staff sometimes using it, while 26% stated by November 2021 that they no longer used remote methods of contact.

Figure 3
England: Remote contact with children throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic

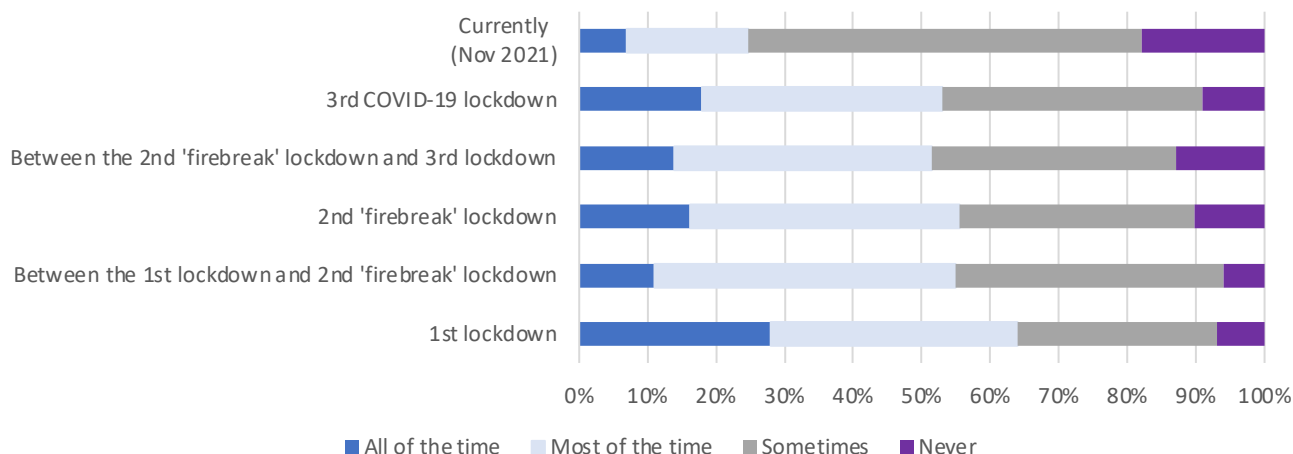


² The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic:
[Research-Briefing-GM-YOTs-Adaptations-to-Practice.pdf \(mmu.ac.uk\)](https://www.mmu.ac.uk/research-briefing-gm-yots-adaptations-to-practice.pdf)

Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

For Welsh YOTs, the picture is similar, however responses indicate a higher proportion of staff using remote contacts during the first lockdown, with 64% of staff reporting using this method either all or most of the time. As illustrated in figure 4, remote contact continued to be used throughout the various stages of the pandemic mostly or all the time, until more recently in November 2021, when this reduced to 25%. **Remote working is still being used by 58% of staff sometimes.**

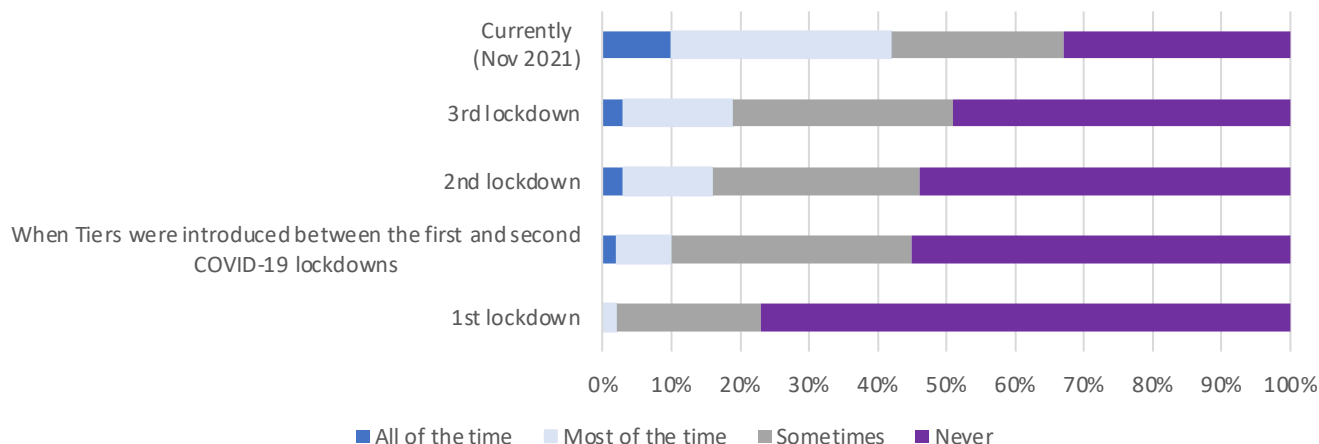
Figure 4
Wales: Remote contact with children throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic



Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in Wales survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

Findings from the English survey illustrate the challenges that YOT staff faced to be able to work from their YOT office, in a dedicated YOT building during the pandemic. Figure 5 illustrates the majority of respondents (77%) reported they never worked in the office during the first lockdown, adhering to the ‘work from home’ government directive, this had reduced to 49% by the third lockdown. Furthermore, a third of staff reported that by November 2021 they were still not working from a YOT office and only 10% of respondents reported that they were working from a YOT office all of the time. Interestingly, more staff (40%) are now using other premises for contacts with children. This is similar to reports by GM YOT staff in June 2021 for example, many staff were using NHS buildings to see children.

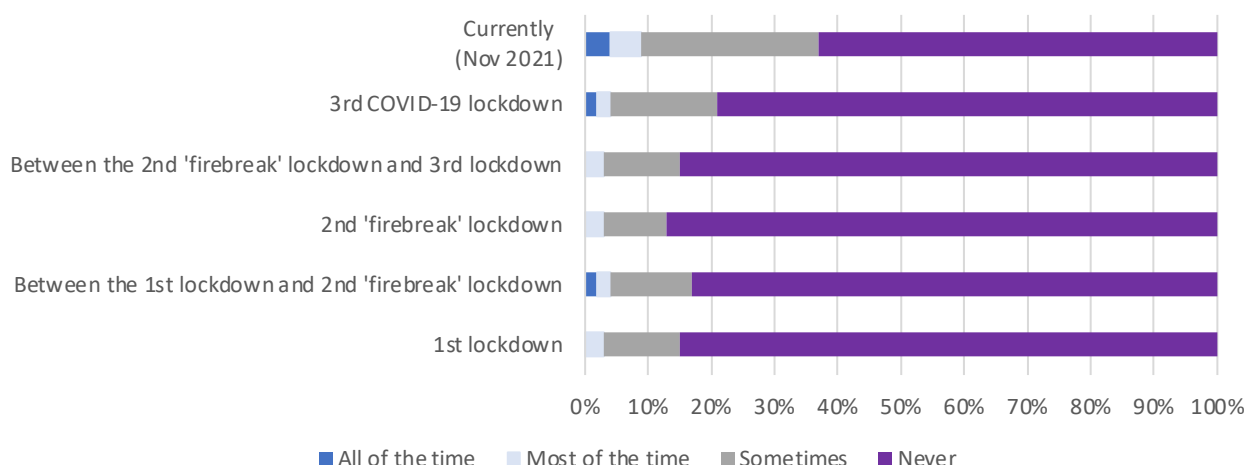
Figure 5
England: Working from a YOT office throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic



Source: *The Impact and Implications of Covid-19 on the YJS in England survey (MCYS Nov 2021)*

In Wales, the majority of YOT staff, 85%, responded that they stopped working from a dedicated YOT office and building during the first lockdown and that this remained the norm up until November 2021. From November 2021, 28% of staff responded that they have returned to work from a YOT office however, two thirds (63%) reported they never work from a YOT office.

Figure 6
Wales: Working in the YOT office throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic



Source: *The Impact and Implications of Covid-19 on the YJS in Wales survey (MCYS Nov 2021)*

The survey results indicate a change in working practices for YOT staff in England and Wales, whether as a direct result of YOT buildings remaining closed or staff opting for a hybrid service delivery model consisting of remote contacts and office working. Our earlier work across GM (see Smithson et al, June 2021)³ demonstrated that YOT staff were overwhelmingly in favour of a more ‘blended’ approach to working, i.e. office based and remote and the survey results illustrate this may also be the case at a national level.

Children’s responses about their experiences of remote contact with their YOT worker was mixed. Each of the 12 children that we worked with in GM had experience of face-to-face contact and remote contact (telephone calls). The following extracts from discussions with children provide a balanced view of their opinions about remote working.

3 The Youth Justice System’s Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Adaptations to practice and service delivery: www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/COVID-19_and_Youth_Justice_Paper_1.pdf

Conversation between a researcher and a child aged 16 working with a GM YOT during Covid-19 on a community sentence

R = Researcher

P = Participant

R: Tell me a bit about how YOT changed for you during Covid.

P: I found it a bit easier, it was better innit, because it was just less stressful and that innit. After the first lockdown, it didn't go back to normal, but I had more face-to-face appointments. I'd say after a while I kind of wanted the face-to-face appointments.

R: You wanted them?

P: Yes...Just the phone call was kind of a bit pointless, just two minutes on the phone, when you're on the phone innit, once you're off the phone it just goes out of your head the conversation and that.

R: How many months would you say you were having those phone calls for rather than the face-to-face visits?

P: I'd say from the start of lockdown... up until about August, September

R: Okay, so that was a bit easier but then after having these phone calls for about six months you were ready for the face-to-face stuff? How has it been since, how is it now?

P: It's all right really, I have a lot of face-to-face appointments, I still have the odd telephone one and that, it's better.

Conversation between a researcher and a child aged 16 working with a GM YOT during Covid-19 on a community sentence

R = Researcher

P = Participant

P: It's a bit awkward (on the phone). It's not just you talking, you're doing talking, do you know what I mean? When you're on the phone... when I have a phone appointment I'll just be on my Xbox and have it (the phone) on speaker, do you know what I mean? When you ring them and there's a YOT worker, like a new YOT worker, and you don't know who they are and they start ringing you and then when you see the worker, I just don't like that, it's a bit awkward.

R: Can you explain a bit more about that?

P: When you're on the phone, ringing them, they ring you and introduce themselves, I don't like that though me, you talk to them on the phone and then you see them. It's a bit weird.

R: So now you're back seeing the YOT face-to-face, how's that been?

P: Yes, it's all right, I think it's better than on the phone because sometimes on the phone they'll be talking for ages. When you see them face-to-face you can try and get it done quickly and stuff.

Other children held differing views to those above about their preferences for office contact.

“I’m always in the YOT office nowadays” (for contacts). It’s shit going to the office”. **(16 year-old child on community order)**

“I didn’t even know there was an office.” **(15 year-old child on community order)**

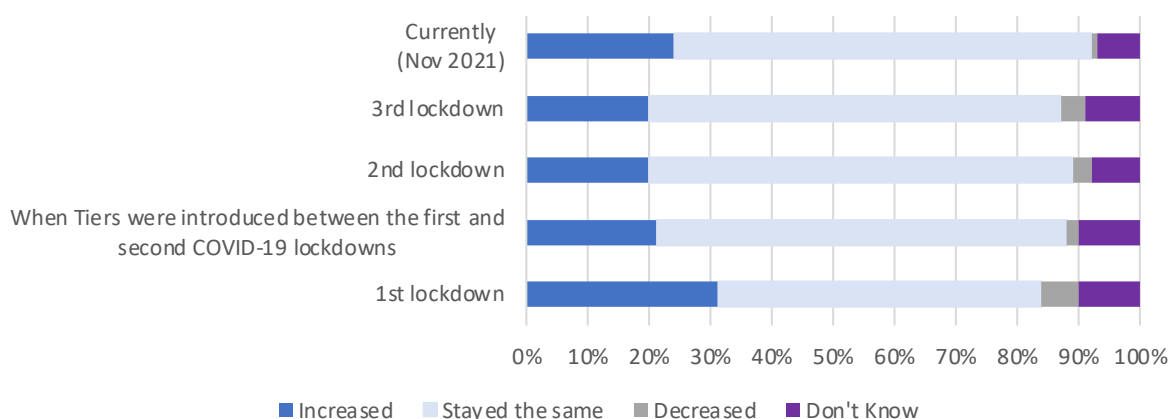
Responses from the national surveys indicate that YOT practitioners have in the main adopted hybrid ways of working. Of concern is that some practitioners are yet to return to the office and while we still do not have a full understanding of children’s engagement levels with and preference for remote contact, efforts need to be made to ensure that children’s preferences and needs are prioritised when decisions are taken about contact.

Safeguarding Issues throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic

In Harris and Goodfellow’s (2021)⁴ review of the literature, many examples of the concerns surrounding the wider impact of Covid-19 on children are acknowledged. The UN Committee of Human Rights of the Child (April 2020, p1)⁵ warned of the ‘grave physical, emotional and psychological’ impact the Covid-19 pandemic is having on children’. In an earlier paper, focusing on the welfare and vulnerabilities of children, published as part of this project in January 2022 (see Smithson et al, Jan 2022)⁶, we highlighted that although the welfare and safeguarding of children most at risk of harm to themselves, or others, were prioritised by GM YOT staff during the first lockdown in March 2020, and subsequently throughout the various tier systems and successive lockdowns, staff raised significant concerns that while necessary, these measures did not go far enough.

These concerns are mirrored to a certain extent at a national level. During the first lockdown, 31% of staff from YOTs in England reported safeguarding issues had increased; compared to 24% reporting an increase by November 2021. Over half of staff, 52% in the 1st lockdown, and 68% in November 2021, responded that safeguarding issues had remained the same as pre-pandemic levels during the national lockdowns.

Figure 7
England: Safeguarding Issues throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic



Source: *The Impact and Implications of Covid-19 on the YJS in Wales survey (MCYS Nov 2021)*

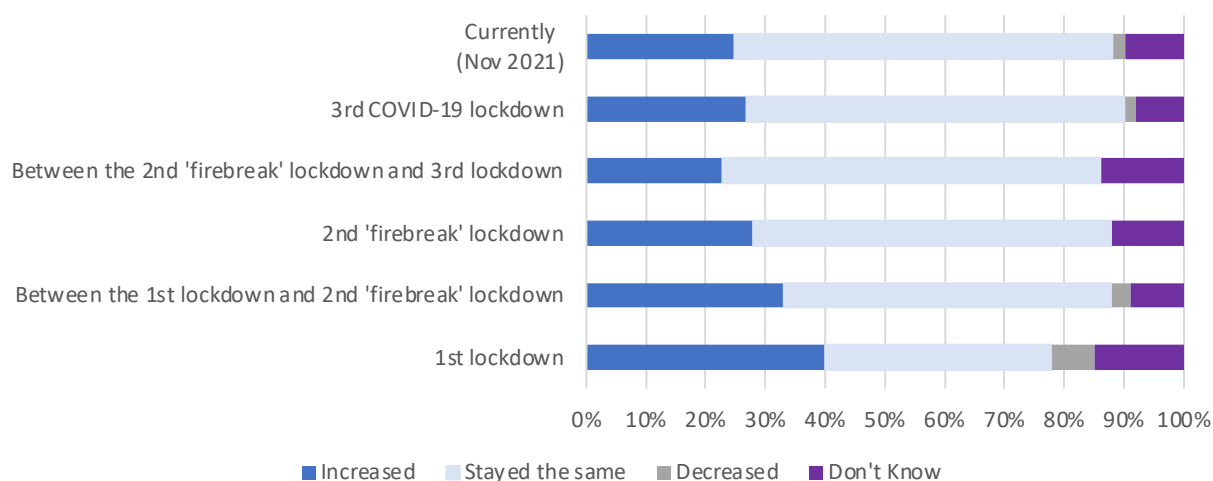
4 The Youth Justice System’s Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Literature Review: [Impact+of+COVID+-+Literature+Review+FINAL+Updated+Oct+21.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

5 The UN Committee of Human Rights of the Child: [Treaty bodies Download \(ohchr.org\)](#)

6 The Youth Justice’s Response to the Covid-19 pandemic; Children’s Welfare Needs and Vulnerabilities: [www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/Academic_Paper_Youth_Justice_Systems_Response_Covid-19_Pandemic_Welfare-Needs-and-Vulnerabilities-Paper-2.pdf](#)

The proportion of staff, from Welsh YOTs, reporting an increase in safeguarding issues during the first lockdown was higher in comparison to English YOTs, with 40% of staff responding that safeguarding issues had increased. This reduced throughout the period of the national lockdowns and as of November 2021, 25% of staff responded that issues had increased, whilst over half, 64%, reported that safeguarding issues had remained the same as pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 8
Wales: Safeguarding issues throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic



Source: *The Impact and Implications of Covid-19 on the YJS in Wales survey (MCYS Nov 2021)*

In our earlier paper (Smithson et al, January 2022)⁷ we recommended that there are a number of areas central for planning how the youth justice system can evolve and adapt to deliver a service that recognises and addresses the exacerbated vulnerabilities that justice-involved children have experienced during the pandemic: adopting a public health approach to address the impact of Covid-19 on the welfare and vulnerabilities of justice-involved children; recognising that children are likely to be traumatised by their exposure to increased vulnerabilities during the pandemic and supporting and encouraging children to participate in the planning of post-pandemic youth justice service provision and delivery.

Referrals to Partner Agencies

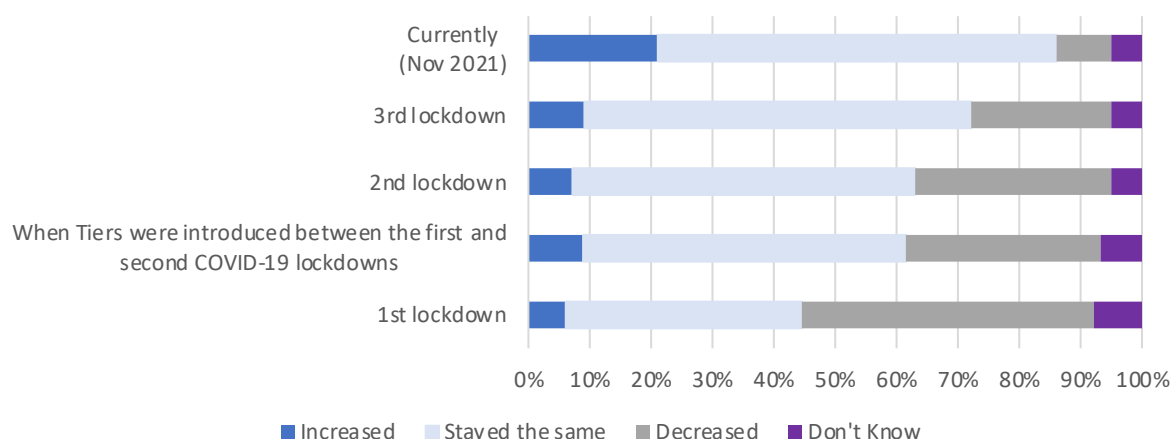
In an earlier paper focusing on YOT partnership working across GM during the pandemic (Smithson et al February, 2022)⁸, we found that the dismantling of the YOTs' traditional multi-agency and co-location model due to Covid-19 restrictions was a significant concern for YOT staff and partner organisations. While overall, health service partners carried on as 'business as usual', the re-location of some health staff back to NHS offices impacted on informal communication links with YOT staff and hampered children's referrals to specialist health services. GM staff spoke of the impact on referrals due to remote working, not being in the same office, a 'breakdown in communication', and limited assessments taking place, consequently leading to children's unidentified needs.

The responses from GM YOTs are mirrored at a national level in England. 48% of staff reported a decrease in referrals to partnership agencies during the first lockdown, as can be seen from figure 9. This steadily increased over time and by November 2021, 21% of staff responded an increase in referrals.

⁷ *ibid*:
www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/Academic_Paper_Youth_Justice_Systems_Response_Covid-19_Pandemic_Welfare-Needs-and-Vulnerabilities-Paper-2.pdf

⁸ *The Youth Justice's Response to the Covid-19 pandemic; Partnership Working*:
www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/COVID-19_and_Youth_Justice_Paper_3.pdf

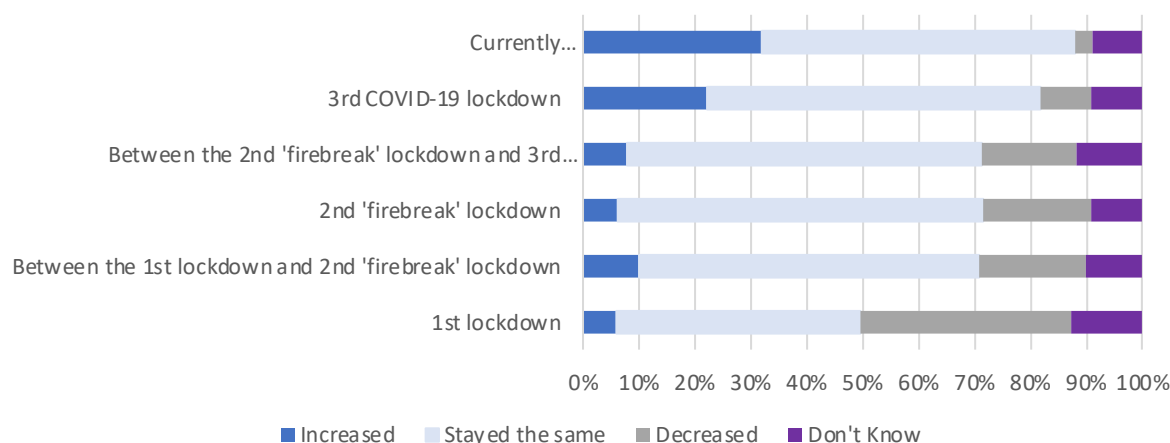
Figure 9
Referrals to partner agencies throughout the Covid 10 Pandemic



Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

Responses from Welsh YOTs follow a similar pattern. 38% of staff indicated a decrease in referrals to partnership agencies during the first lockdown, with 32% of staff reporting an increase in referrals by November 2021.

Figure 10
Referrals to partnership agencies throughout the Covid 19 Pandemic



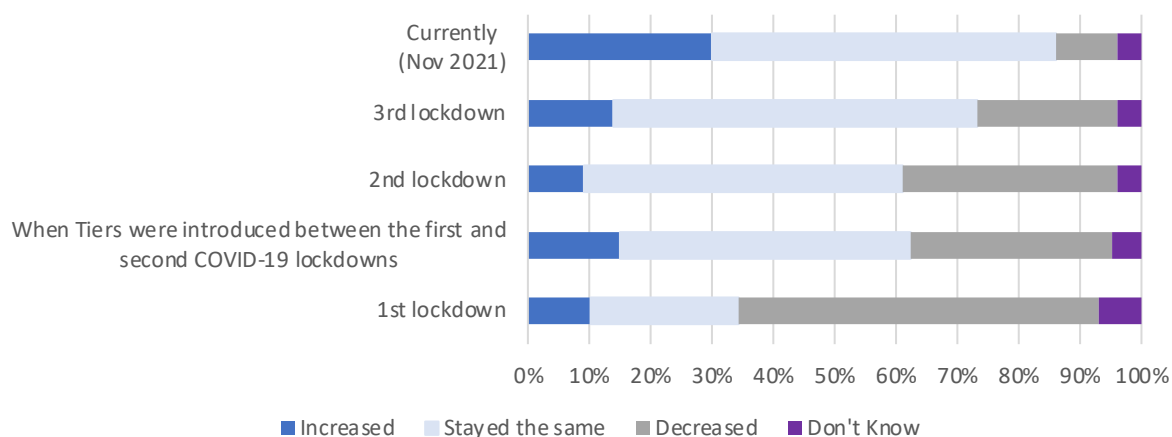
Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

Intervention Services

In our earlier paper on partnership working (Smithson et al, February 2022)⁹, GM YOT staff spoke of the difficulties of offering and providing interventions to children during the pandemic. Building closures and organisations offering only a limited service meant that some activities were unable to take place under pandemic restrictions. Further, organisations commissioned for specialist intervention work such as sporting venues were closed because of social distancing requirements. Consequently, children were unable to engage in beneficial desistance pursuits to assist with issues such as social isolation, anger, obesity, substance misuse and poor mental health. Staff reported slower response times to queries, commenting that delays were exacerbated by a lack of shared office space due to 'work at home' directives.

National survey data reflect the findings from across GM. 58% of staff from English YOTs reported a decrease in the type and range of interventions they were able to offer children. By November 2021, 30% of staff reported the offer of interventions was increasing to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 11
Type and range of interventions staff were able to offer children

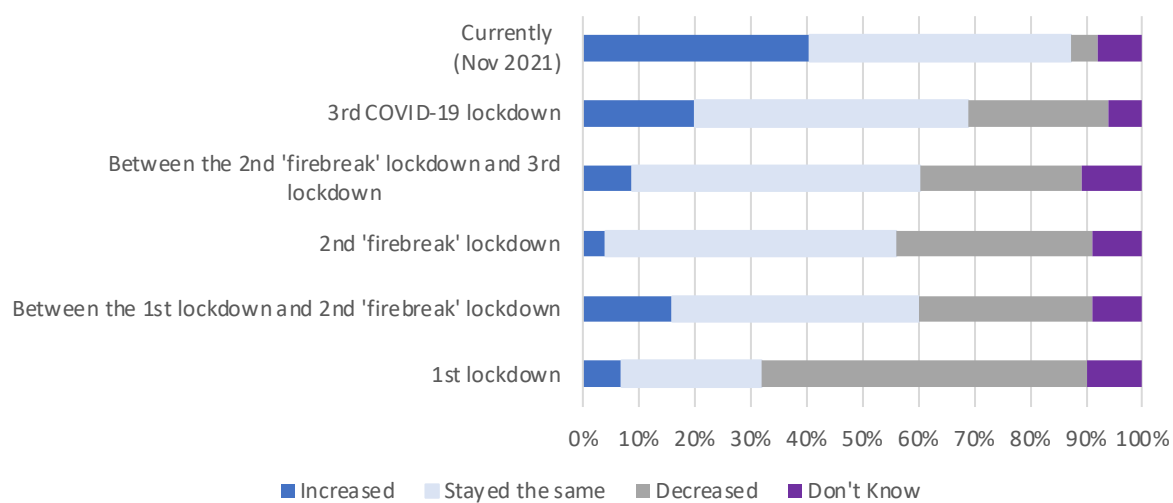


Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

The picture is similar for Welsh YOTs. 58% of YOT staff responded that the type and range of interventions on offer for children decreased during the first lockdown. By November 2021 41% responded that offers of interventions had increased.

⁹ The Youth Justice's Response to the Covid-19 pandemic; Partnership Working:
www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/COVID-19_and_Youth_Justice_Paper_3.pdf

Figure 12
The type and range of interventions staff were able to offer children



Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

Youth Offending Disposals, Orders and Programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic

In Out of Court Disposals (OOCs)

Harris and Goodfellow's (2021)¹⁰ review of the literature makes reference to Her Majesty's Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors January 2021 report of YOTs' during the pandemic, which found that overall, people who came into contact with the police were more likely to receive an out of court disposal during the pandemic than prior to the pandemic. Out-of-court disposals can be used for children who have admitted an offence, but it is not in the public interest to prosecute. Working with the police, YOTs can consider three types of out-of-court disposals for children who commit low-level offences – community resolutions (CR); youth cautions (YC); and youth conditional cautions (YCC). Police may issue a CR alone but in many cases they involve YOTs and YOTs are informed and involved in decisions on YC and YCC. However, YOTs have tended to develop a range of different approaches to this type of activity. GM YOTs described varying OOC processes, but the majority had out of court decision-making panels and diversion interventions in place prior to the pandemic.

Harris and Goodfellow (ibid. 2021)¹¹ note that HMICFRS found mixed results regarding whether police forces had increased the use of out of court disposals, with forces reporting reasons for doing so including keeping those suspected of minor offences out of custody areas, perceived difficulties in receiving timely charging advice from the CPS, receiving advice from the CPS that out of OOCs were more appropriate, and the perception that court delays meant victims were unlikely to receive swift justice. While the reported proportionate increase in OOCs is positive in decreasing the number of children facing long court delays and possible further criminalisation, concerns were raised by Chief Inspectors that in the past, OOC work in assessing wellbeing or risk of harm was generally lower quality than court disposals, and that those accepting cautions, for example, do not always understand the implications, highlighting decisions should be driven by case by case information, not by court difficulties.

10 The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Literature Review: [Impact-of-COVID--Literature+Review+FINAL+Updated+Oct+21.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

11 Ibid: [Impact-of-COVID--Literature+Review+FINAL+Updated+Oct+21.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

Across GM, YOT professionals had mixed opinions relating to the use of OOCs during the pandemic. Some teams noted that OOCs had increased due to court backlogs and the police and CPS redirecting more low-level offences to be dealt with out of court, whilst others reported that throughput had remained stable throughout the periods of lockdown. Practitioners explained that any delays and decreases in the number of OOCs was a result of the lack of time that police had to process them given they were prioritising more serious offences during the pandemic.

"I don't know if the police were dealing with things differently or CPS were giving a different slant on it because our out of court disposals and our out of court referrals have gone through the roof compared with what it was... I would say some of the out of court, some I look and I think, "My God, back in the day I don't think that would have been an out of court disposal in my world." (YOT Operations Manager)

"... just this last quarter, quarter-three, which was kind of October, November, December, significant increase in out of court stuff. And some very historical as well. So, it's kind of people clearing the books from where things quietened down. And it wasn't so much the court stuff. It's the out of court deluge we've had... So, it's all that stuff about a lot of things being moved to out of court disposal. So, we've had increase, increase, increase." (YOT Head of Service)

Conversely, some of the differences noted were attributed to procedural changes agreed with the police prior to the pandemic, whereby YOTs would be involved in 'triage' screening and assessments to support more consistent joint decision-making and targeted interventions. Mostly, joint decision-making panels were able to move to online forums swiftly, however interventions were hampered due to stay at home directives and social distancing measures.

"We've changed our procedure so we're trying to get as many out of court and prevention programmes as we can, so we deal with young people slightly different. We have PIED [prevention, intervention, engagement and diversion] meetings in [area] where any young person who has been brought to the police's attention, there's a meeting the following week and we try and divert them. ... I think because we've been proactive in trying to address that, we've not really put it [the increase] down to Covid." (YOT Advanced Practitioner)

A number of police stations across the GM region were closed during part of the first lock-down. As such, children could not attend for a caution to be administered and police officers reported that these were either suspended, delivered at home or issued remotely (e.g. Zoom, Face-time). To avoid delays, one YOT explained that they were undertaking intervention work with children first and then they were taken to the police station to receive their caution. They reported that children engage positively, despite this adaptation..

"So we did quite a few backwards; we assessed them, we did their youth caution work, and then they had their actual youth caution retrospectively, when the police station was open. We were a bit scared that we were going to have young people that didn't engage, and normally, if they don't engage on a youth caution you take it back to the officer in charge and you say, "we've tried to do this as a youth caution, but it's been ineffective, they've not engaged,"... And they decide whether they're going to take it to CPS, or whatever. So we were a bit like, "Ooh, I hope that works out." Because obviously, there's nothing formal or official in place. But we didn't have an issue with that, they all (young people) engaged without problem." (Targeted Youth Support Practitioner)

Some GM YOTs stated that Covid-19 had curtailed the ability to commit certain offences, for example, violence in schools and shoplifting because of school and shop closures. Conversely, others reported an increase in certain types of offences, for example, cannabis use and domestic violence.

“In terms of offence types, there was quite a lot prior to lockdown that was coming through where it was young people that had been taking weapons into schools. Quite a lot of those were coming through for out of court disposal decisions. Obviously, that’s reduced a lot with a lot of young people not being in school. I would say that the majority of offences that we’re looking at in out of court disposals though are still around common assault, public order, possession of drugs but less around theft, things that you would need shops to be open for.” (YOT Head of Service)

A salient observation and concern made by some teams was higher tariff offences coming through as OOCd notifications from the police. Practitioners were of the opinion that this was associated with reduced court hearings and the drive to clear backlogs in the system.

“I would say some of the out of court, some I look and I think, “My God, back in the day I don’t think that would have been an out of court disposal in my world.” (YOT Operations Manager)

“... I think we had quite a few that were supposed to appear in court, but I think CPS and the police looked at it and thought ‘well are they eligible for out of court disposal?’ I think we had quite a few deferred... I think originally courts made a decision only to deal with serious offences. (YOT Operations Manager)

A combination of successful and unsuccessful engagement with OOCds was cited by staff, with much the same reasons given as with other YOT interventions. This was dependent on whether children had the confidence or communication skills for virtual/remote service delivery, their preferred learning style or for more pragmatic reasons such as their ability to access remotely due to lack of mobile/smart phones or laptops. Furthermore, children presented with an OOCds were more likely to be new cases and not have pre-existing relationships with staff, therefore making engagement and rapport building more difficult. This concern has been raised at a national level.

“We all knew that it was having a detrimental impact on our relationships with the kids that we were working with.....in all the years I’ve worked for YOT, I’ve never really had a disengagement and literally, the rejection of voluntary support programmes. Your diversions, your youth cautions, your community resolutions, they just didn’t want to do it... “What, over the phone? I’m not doing that.” So the amount of cases we were opening and closing were massive... (OOCd Practitioner)

Although some remote approaches were praised as successful, a key concern raised by YOTs and HM Inspectorate of Probation was the difficulty in undertaking assessments of a child without meeting them in person and adapting assessments to take into consideration new COVID-19-related risks. **Overall HM Inspectorate of Probation’s thematic review (2020)¹² states that some children receiving out of court disposals had their assessments and delivery entirely remotely. However, very little is known about children’s perceptions of digital service delivery, and the impact on children of having their programmes and sentences overseen remotely.** The long-term impact is unknown, but concerns have been raised, for example by the Early Intervention Foundation, about the risks of virtual and digital delivery of interventions (see Harris and Goodfellow, 2021).¹³

¹² HMIP Thematic Inspection of the work of YOSs during the Covid-19 pandemic:

[A thematic review of the work of youth offending services during the COVID-19 pandemic.pdf \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/a-thematic-review-of-the-work-of-youth-offending-services-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf)

Referral Orders

Referral orders are the most common community order given to young people by youth courts and require the young person to attend a referral order panel. Referral Orders directly involve the local community, by means of volunteer youth offender panel members and as beneficiaries of reparation. “Youth offender panels conduct meetings in accordance with restorative principles and practice. These meetings enable children to recognise the consequences of their offending and to be accountable for their actions. A ‘contract’ is agreed between the child and the youth offender panel. The contract will include a range of goals and activities, with the aim of supporting the child towards living a safe and crime-free life and making a positive contribution to society. (Referral Order Guidance, Ministry of Justice October, 2018).¹⁴

At a national level, referral order panel members raised concerns to HM Inspectorate of Probation that panels were challenging to hold remotely. Members reported that they couldn’t ‘get a sense of the child’, and that they were unable to pick up on non-verbal communication and dynamics between children and their parents and carers.

As recommended by HM Chief Inspectors of the criminal justice system, and Crest Advisory, there is a need for proper evaluation of the temporary measures implemented during COVID-19 before they become widespread and permanently embedded.¹⁵

Across GM, YOT staff were complimentary about the volunteer community panel members who continued to attend virtual panel meetings; consequently referral orders could continue, albeit it with limitations of what could be included in a child’s contract.

“Panel members have been great. Some chose not to stay involved... for lots of reasons. We have had less panel members, but we have had really good panel members who have stood up and just gone over and above, to the point where I sent them all hampers and flowers at Christmas, because they were so good. (YOT Head of Service)

Where IT access was an issue for children, one YOT team addressed this by engaging a support worker who would find alternative venues to the YOT office or visit a child’s house with a laptop to enable them to join the panel meeting remotely.

13 The Youth Justice System’s Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Literature Review:
[Impact+of+COVID+-+Literature+Review+FINAL+Updated+Oct+21.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/746365/referral-order-guidance-9-october-2018.pdf)

14 Referral Order Guidance:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/746365/referral-order-guidance-9-october-2018.pdf

15 CJ Joint Inspection; Impact of the pandemic on the CJS:
<https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/cji/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/01/2021-01-13-State-of-nation.pdf>
Crest Advisory:
www.crestadvisory.com/post/survive-recover-rebuild-justice-post-covid

Restorative work with children in YOTs has been disrupted, especially from the victim's perspective, whereby face-to-face meetings have been unable to take place to obtain their views about the offence, reparation or support required to enable them to be represented at panel meetings, and direct work has been unable to take place. Victims' involvement is a crucial component of the restorative justice (RJ) process, allowing them to express the impact that any offending has had on them, having the opportunity to either directly or indirectly communicate with perpetrators to repair any harm and enabling victims to find a positive way forward (Code of Practice for Victims, updated 2021).¹⁶

"... I would always be offering to come out and see them. And then when I do a home visit, that's when I get their views and really get an idea of what's happened and offer them any support and ask them about their feelings towards RJ at some point. Now, that's all done on that first phone call. I'm not allowed to visit any victims or go to their home even if they thought that they wanted me to do that... that's just not something that I can offer...." (Victim Officer)

In an earlier paper on GM YOTs' adaptations to practice (Smithson et al, June 2021)¹⁷, we drew attention to the challenges of delivering reparation work remotely, if at all. While referral order panels continued remotely, having children undertake reparation work was difficult. Reparation work can include anything from involving children in bike maintenance, litter picking, to writing letters to victims. The work can be very practical and therefore not a natural fit with remote delivery. Staff responsible for reparation spoke of the impact of social distancing and associated health and safety requirements that made practical face-to-face work impossible

Intensive Supervision and Surveillance (ISS) Programme

ISS is the most rigorous, non-custodial intervention available for children. Most children spend six months on ISS, with the most intensive supervision (25 hours) lasting for the first three months. Following this, supervision continues at a reduced intensity (a minimum of five hours per week) for a further three months. On its completion a child will continue to be supervised for the remaining period of their order.

GM practitioners stated that they prioritised high risk/public protection cases during the pandemic such as those children subject to ISS. A significant cause for concern was the challenge of delivering the usual 25 hours of rigorous oversight and comprehensive intervention work under lock-down restrictions.

Heads of Service reported that YOT national standards for ISS were suspended at the beginning of the pandemic in recognition that 25 hours of supervision was impractical. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that children on ISS were vulnerable, and practitioners attempted to see this cohort of children face-to-face with social distancing measures in place. They were usually contacted on a daily basis using remote methods (e.g. Facetime, WhatsApp) or by telephone. They were provided with a broad time-frame in which to be available to have contact with YOT staff. Staff would contact them unexpectedly within that time to ensure that they were complying with the requirements of the ISS order. Staff rotas were produced to guarantee daily contact could be scheduled.

¹⁶ Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Victim's Code):

www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime/code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime-in-england-and-wales-victims-code

¹⁷ The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Adaptations to Practice and Service Delivery:

www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/COVID-19_and_Youth_Justice_Paper_1.pdf

“What we did initially is we put on the timetables that the home visit could be anywhere between 10am and 4pm, then we mixed it up day by day, that way we told the young people they had to stay in their houses. They should have been anyway given that we were under lockdown, but obviously the young people don’t necessarily adhere to that. We would say we could visit at 10 o’clock in the morning, but we could visit at 4pm. That would make sure that the young person stayed in their house until the visit was complete. We’d also put telephone contacts down.” (ISS Practitioner)

The value of this approach has not been assessed or evaluated but children did not necessarily view it as useful.

“People used to just come to my house. It was always different people so I can’t remember which one was which... It was just annoying because I didn’t really know when they were going to turn up. Sometimes I was asleep and I’d just be woken up. It’s actually stressful that.” (15 year-old)

One youth justice worker explained defensible decision-making became a major focus for ISS cohort.

“...it was uncomfortable because in most cases ISS should only be given where there are identified risks and the work on the ISS programme moderates those risks in some ways but then we had that situation that through no fault of the child and through no fault of ours those risks weren’t being moderated. So, it was a little bit uncomfortable from a risk management point of view. Once we took the focus away and accepted the fact that we could never make the 25 hours in a month of Sundays, we started to focus on what are the key things we need to do with this child to keep them safe? To keep the community safe? Ignoring for the moment that we’ll look terrible when it comes to figures being reported back, what’s the right thing to do here? Not what will make us look good. There were some tensions around that sometimes about what looks good on paper and what’s the right thing to do.” (Youth Justice Practitioner)

Many staff spoke about the difficulties of producing full ISS timetables during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, school attendance could contribute to the ISS hours but due to school closures during the various lockdowns this could not be included (see Smithson et al, February 2022)¹⁸. As discussed earlier in this paper, interventions and support work was limited and group work was suspended, leaving children unmonitored and without robust formal activities to pursue. Practitioners conveyed the complications of delivering timetables to children in order to make them aware of the stipulations they had to abide by to comply with their court order. Staff were working from home without printers to print off documents and activity sheets, postal systems were not operating as normal and hand delivery was not feasible due to ‘stay at home’ directives and social distancing rules.

“It has been really difficult, it’s turned the ISS upside down. We’ve not been able to do the 25 hour provision, and that’s something we’ve had to inform the courts of, to say that this is what we can offer, if you’re happy to give this young person ISS, this is what the timetable is going to look like. It is not going to be 25 hour week contacts that we’ve been doing previously.” (ISS Practitioner)

¹⁸ The Youth Justice’s Response to the Covid-19 pandemic; Partnership Working:
www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/COVID-19_and_Youth_Justice_Paper_3.pdf

Conversation between a researcher and a child aged 16 working with a GM YOT during Covid-19 on an ISS order

R = Researcher

P = Participant

P Meetings everyday innit. It's the ISS one.

R Oh ISS?

P Yes.

R I'm wondering how ISS worked during Covid because you're supposed to see someone everyday aren't you? In Covid you couldn't see anyone.

P Yes. So sometimes I'd have phone calls but mostly it was going there (the office)

R Down the road to the office?

P Yeah, three o'clock once a week.

R Was that during proper lockdown as well?

P Not proper lockdown, no.

R When it got a bit easier?

P Yeah, when it got a bit easier, I used to go there, I'd have hand sanitiser and a mask. It was sound, it was only fifteen minutes or half-an-hour, obviously, doing the little tick in the box, little things with the computer, they didn't really help me.

GM Staff reported improved compliance with orders and a reduction in breaches, this was due to the less intensive nature of the intervention and children not having to travel to YOT premises, therefore making it more straightforward for children to abide by. Furthermore, children were not out in public spaces/settings (if at all) due to lockdown rules, which led to less opportunity for breaching the requirements of their orders.

"In terms of their compliance, from what I can see, it's improved a lot since the lockdown happened because it's so much easier for them. They didn't have to cross the city... basically have to answer the phone or make themselves ready for visits. The compliance was really good in that respect, and there was a lot less breaching people. Maybe in the future we have to work a balance between the old and the new methods..." (ISS Practitioner)

As restrictions eased YOTs could begin to offer more interventions and ISS orders were managed by a combination of methods, including telephone, remote and face-to-face activities, and education activities when children returned to education settings. However, staff stressed that providing the full 25 hours of contact required of an ISS order remained unfeasible.

While presenting a myriad of challenges to YOTs and the wider youth justice system, Covid-19 has presented a time to pause and reassess what youth justice could look like in a post-covid world. Practitioners were cognisant of this opportunity and in relation to ISS, they were already beginning to consider the benefits to children of reduced contact time.

“He would never have complied with 25 hours a week of ISS... And he welcomed the daily contact. He didn’t just do it, he got something out of it. And that’s something else that we took into consideration because you’ve always got that argument in your head, which is, “Well, hang on. We keep going to him because that’s what we had to do. We couldn’t expect him to come to us. So, there wasn’t much onus on him. But actually, we probably got more productive stuff done with him. The 25 hours, I don’t think he would have managed them...” (YOT Head of Service).

Changes to Offending Behaviour

‘Stay at home’ directives exacerbated particular risks for many children, such as increases in reports of domestic abuse and child abuse. During the initial stages of the Covid-19 crisis, Refuge reported around a 50% increase in demand to its Helpline, and a 300% increase in visits to its National Domestic Abuse Help Line website (Refuge, 2020)¹⁹.

At a national level, 71% of staff from English YOTs responded there had been changes to children’s offending behaviour/s. The most frequently (15%) stated change from the comments made in the survey was in relation to domestic violence.

“Domestic conflict increased during lockdowns for both looked after Children and non-looked after children”.

“Families more in crisis (behaviours within the home increasing, parents struggling to cope with challenging behaviours)”.

The same proportion (71%) of staff from Welsh YOTs responded that there had been changes in children’s offending behaviour/s. The most frequently stated changes were also in relation to domestic violence.

“Reduced offending in the community, however aggressive physical aggression in the family home increased.”

“Domestic abuse, child to parent violence, offences linked to contextual safeguarding and exploitation”

At the beginning of the pandemic, national press reports suggested that lockdown measures had led to a decrease in violent crime and a potential reprieve for children involved in drug-related violence (Express & Star, 2020).²⁰ This was confirmed by data from the Office for National Statistics, which identified a 3% decrease in knife-related offences between July and September 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2020)²³²¹. Nonetheless, across GM, YOT staff were of the view that children were still at risk of organised crime, criminal exploitation and serious violence during lockdown.

¹⁹ Refuge:

[A year of lockdown: Refuge releases new figures showing dramatic increase in activity - Refuge Charity - Domestic Violence Help](#)

²⁰ Express and Star; Violent Crime in West Midlands Down 41% during coronavirus lockdown:

www.expressandstar.com/news/crime/2020/04/02/drop-in-violent-crime-and-burglaries-during-lockdown-say-west-midlands-police/

²¹ Office of National Statistics; crime in England & Wales; year ending September 2020:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingseptember2020#knife-or-sharp-instrument-offences>

This was mirrored at a national level with 10% of all respondents in England commenting on an increase in violent offences. For example:

“It feels like violence and gang culture has increased”

“Increase in serious violence, particularly knife crime”

Increases in violent offences was not mentioned by Welsh YOT staff.

Other offences English staff felt had increased included anti-social-behaviour, substance misuse, sexual offences, and offences linked to vulnerability and CCE the following comments illustrate these responses:

“It perhaps went underground – exploitation.”

“Increased links to local drug dealing, via organised crime groups and criminal child exploitation.”

“Increase in missing from care, increase in boredom and therefore anti-social behaviour (as there were no clubs open).”

These concerns were mirrored by Welsh staff who commented on increases in online offending, CCE, substance misuse and children’s mental health.

“More criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation cases and more harmful sexualised behaviour and more preventions cases.”

“Use of internet to purchase drugs. Increase in risk taking behaviour. Young People with deteriorating mental health”.

Reflections on the Covid-19 Pandemic and its impact on the Youth Justice System

The country's return to pre-Covid-19 levels of functioning will be a gradual process. This was recognised by GM YOTs in an earlier paper on YOTs' adaptations to practice (Smithson et al, June 2021)²². The majority of GM staff expressed concerns about children's responses to a return to more structured face-to-face work and the associated requirements of their orders and interventions. The overwhelming response was that children will struggle. Staff were also mindful of the short-term challenges of working with and supporting children who might have been struggling with mental health issues, school, education, employment and a range of adverse childhood experiences prior to the pandemic and the likelihood that these issues will have been exacerbated by Covid-19. They were not adverse to new ways of working; indeed some spoke of the pandemic as having provided an opportunity to re-think the way in which they worked and more generally how the youth justice system functions.

Challenges During the Pandemic

At a national level as part of the survey to all YOTs in England and Wales, staff were asked to reflect over the entire Covid-19 period and state what they thought were the biggest challenges they faced and rank them in priority order. In England, a total of 833 comments were made by YOTs and these were organised into themes (see Table 1 for the full range of themes).

Looking across all the comments made by English YOT staff, staffing support/issues (14%) was considered the biggest challenge overall, followed by remote/virtual working (10%), and face-to-face access (8%). Interestingly, when staff were asked to rank their comments, these themes also featured in the top three challenges but in the reverse order:

²² The Youth Justice System's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Adaptations to practice and service delivery: www.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/mcys/COVID-19_and_Youth_Justice_Paper_1.pdf

Challenge 1: Face-to-face work

Challenge 2: Remote/virtual working

Challenge 3: Staffing support/issues

Table 1: Challenges faced by YOT staff in England during the Covid-19 pandemic

Biggest Challenges Faced by Staff During Covid-19 (Ranked)							
Theme	Challenge 1	Challenge 2	Challenge 3	Challenge 4	Challenge 5	Total	%
Staffing support/issues	15	22	28	27	26	118	14%
Remote/ virtual working	19	30	13	13	9	84	10%
Face-to-face working	45	12	11	0	0	68	8%
Relationship building/engagement with children	19	0	15	11	12	57	7%
Access to venues	13	16	9	5	1	44	5%
Partnership working	3	5	16	15	4	43	5%
Working from home	9	14	9	8	3	43	5%
IT Issues	6	13	5	6	8	38	5%
Access to interventions	4	22	5	0	2	33	4%
Access to resources	1	7	11	4	3	26	3%
Access to education and employment services	5	3	10	3	0	21	3%
Contact with children	11	6	3	1	0	21	3%
Support for children	3	14	2	0	1	20	2%
Vulnerability/ safeguarding of children	4	7	5	2	2	20	2%
Court adaptations	1	1	1	6	11	20	2%
Children's mental health	1	0	7	5	0	13	2%
Home visits	5	2	3	3	0	13	2%
Covid 19 Safety	9	3	0	1	0	13	2%
Other	35	23	32	30	18	138	17%
Total	208	200	185	140	100	833	100%

Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

'Other' includes: isolation, workload, transporting children, assessments, communication, guidance

A total of 238 comments were made by Welsh YOTs and these were organised into themes (see Table 2 for a full range of these themes). Relationship building/engagement with children (14%) was considered the biggest challenge overall, with remote/virtual working (11%) highlighted as the next most pressing challenge, followed by staffing support/issues (10%). When comments were ranked these topics also featured in the top three challenges.

Challenge 1: Face-to-face access/Remote & virtual working

Challenge 2: Relationship building/Engagement with children

Challenge 3: Staffing support/issues

Table 2: Challenges faced by YOT staff in Wales during the Covid-19 pandemic

Biggest Challenges Faced by Staff During Covid-19 (Ranked)							
Theme	Challenge 1	Challenge 2	Challenge 3	Challenge 4	Challenge 5	Total	%
Engagement/relationship building with children	7	13	10	4	0	34	14%
Remote/virtual working	14	3	4	4	1	26	11%
Staffing support/issues	3	0	10	7	4	24	10%
Face-to-face working	15	4	3		0	22	9%
Working from home	2	5	2	1	6	16	7%
Contact with children	5	6	0	1	3	15	6%
Partnership working	0	5	4	2	2	13	5%
Access to interventions	2	8	0	3	1	14	6%
Covid rules/restrictions	0	2	4	2	3	11	5%
Other	11	14	16	12	10	63	26%
Total	59	60	53	36	30	238	100%

Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

'Other' includes: children's mental health, workload, transporting children, substance misuse trends, ETE, safeguarding.

Unintended Positive Changes

Staff were asked to reflect over the entire Covid-19 period and whether there been any unintended positive changes to their daily practice resulting from the pandemic. In England, 83% reported 'yes' to this question with a total of 176 comments made. Over half (52%) of comments were in relation to working from home/hybrid flexible working, with the next category relating to remote/virtual working (13%). Interestingly, remote/virtual working features in comments made above in relation to the biggest challenges YOT staff faced.

Working from Home/Hybrid flexible Working

Improved work/home life balance

**Use of IT improved/better use of technology (i.e. MS Teams, Zoom, mobile phone)
allows for more flexible working**

Less time spent commuting/travelling to meetings

Improved productivity/better use of time

Being able to attend professional meetings more easily

In Wales, 49 staff reported 'yes' to this question with a total of 88 comments made. Most comments were in relation to remote/virtual working, followed by working from home. Remote/virtual working was highlighted as one of the biggest challenges as well as an unintended positive benefit.

Remote/Virtual Working

Ability to adapt to change

Utilising technology for engaging with children and their families

Able to attend more regional and national meetings (virtually)

Future Challenges

Respondents were asked what they thought were going to be the biggest challenges for working in a post-Covid youth justice system and rank their answers. A total of 548 comments were made by English YOTs and these were organised into themes (see Table 3 for a full range of these themes). Staffing support/issues (12%) was considered the biggest challenge overall, followed by children's mental health (8%) and working from home/hybrid working (8%). When comments were ranked other topics featured in the top three challenges in the following order:

Future Challenge 1: Working from home/hybrid working

Future Challenge 2: Staffing issues/support

Future Challenge 3: Office working

Table 3: Future Challenges for English YOTs in a Post-Covid-19 World

Future Challenges for YOTs in a Post-Covid-19 World (Ranked)							
Theme	Challenge 1	Challenge 2	Challenge 3	Challenge 4	Challenge 5	Total	%
Staffing support/issues	7	22	14	15	6	64	12%
Children's mental health	14	10	9	4	5	42	8%
Working from home/hybrid working	25	8	8		1	42	8%
Covid rules/restrictions	19	9	6	0	5	39	7%
Office working	20	3	6	3	2	34	6%
Access to venues	17	8	5	4		34	6%
Access to interventions/resources	9	10	2	7	3	31	6%
Engagement with children	7	12	6	4	1	30	5%
Returning to face-to-face working	7	10	7	0	4	28	5%
Access to employment and education/ positive activities	6	8	9	3		26	5%
Court adaptations	6	4	3	4	2	19	3%
Serious/violent offending by children	4	3	5	5	1	18	3%
Partnership working	4	7	5	0	1	17	3%
Funding/cuts	0	5	0	5	3	13	2%
IT issues	2	5		0	3	10	2%
Remote/virtual working	0	7	3	0	0	10	2%
Workload/backlogs	5	3		0		8	1%
Other	23	15	19	17	9	83	15%
Total	175	149	107	71	46	548	100%

Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

'Other' includes: Meeting timescales, prevention work, managing change, travelling time, sharing good practice

Across England comments from YOT staff included:

"Making sure the team remain a team now that we can work remotely."

"Staying 'connected' as dispersed teams." and "restoring a positive office culture."

A total of 145 comments were made by Welsh YOT staff and these were organised into themes (see Table 4 for these themes). Unlike English responses, future Covid-19 outbreaks/restrictions was considered the biggest challenge overall, followed by staffing support/issues. Children's mental health and face-to-face working were jointly identified as a future challenge. When comments were ranked, staffing support/issues and face-to-face working, although highlighted overall, did not feature as highly in the ranking order compared with England, conversely office working was identified as a greater future challenge.

Future Challenge 1: Future Covid outbreaks/restrictions

Future Challenge 2: Office working

Future Challenge 3: Children's mental health

Table 4: Future Challenges for Welsh YOTs in a post-Covid-19 world

Future Challenges for YOTs in a Post-Covid-19 World (Ranked)							
Theme	Future Challenge 1	Future Challenge 2	Future Challenge 3	Future Challenge 4	Future Challenge 5	Total	%
Future Covid outbreaks/restrictions	8	8	7	4	1	28	19%
Staffing support/ issues	3	1	3	4	3	14	10%
Children's mental health	6	2	2	1	0	11	8%
Face-to-face working	4	0	5	2	0	11	8%
Office Working	7	1	0	1	1	10	7%
Working from home	3	2	0	0	0	5	3%
Access to venues	0	2	1	1		4	3%
Access to interventions	0	4	0	0	0	4	3%
Safeguarding	0	3	0	1	0	4	3%
Access to employment and education	2	0	1	0	0	3	2%
Other	12	14	8	5	12	51	35%
Total	45	37	27	19	17	145	100%

Source: *The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the youth justice system in England survey (MCYS, Nov 2021)*

'Other' includes: Delays in the Youth Justice System, workload, transporting children, courts, home visits, compliance/ engagement

”

For many staff across GM, the uncertainty of the structure of their work was a source of anxiety. Managers were cognisant of the need for additional staff support in a post-covid world. This mirrored responses from the national surveys. These included:

“Managing staff exhaustion/ burnout” and “Supporting staff who have worked throughout the pandemic and haven’t had a chance to “pause” and rest themselves.”

“I see every event as an opportunity but the pandemic has tested my positivity to the limit but I still see this time as an opportunity to review our services and ensure it is fit for purpose going forward. Bring it on, children first, pandemic second, we will find a way.

Across GM anxiety was frequently mentioned by YOT staff as a concern they had about children and their increasing levels of anxiety over the course of the pandemic. There was widespread agreement that some mental health issues that may have been dealt with pre-covid as ‘minor’, rapidly escalated into what practitioners described as children “being in crisis”.

The national survey results from England and Wales indicate similar concerns including:

Emotional and mental well-being of children and the trauma they experienced from the pandemic.”

“Supporting all the mental health issues the pandemic created with a lack of mental health support in the area” and, the “Longer-term impact on children’s wellbeing.”

Prior to the pandemic, the prevalence of mental health needs amongst justice-involved children was acute: 71% of sentenced children were assessed as having mental health concerns in the year ending March 2019 (Youth Justice Board, 2020). Concerns around children’s mental health needs is indicative of the wider concerns around welfare and vulnerabilities.

Conclusions and Considerations

This briefing paper makes an extensive contribution to understanding the impact of the pandemic at a national level. Presenting findings from a national survey of all YOTs across England and Wales (58% response rate) the findings illustrate the similarities in experiences, adaptations and concerns amongst YOTs. The national picture shows that YOTs adapted service provision and delivery with agility and speed, and that over half of practitioners felt that their YOT had done a very good job during the pandemic.

The survey clearly demonstrates that the majority of practitioners reverted to remote delivery during the first stages of the pandemic. While this has decreased somewhat, the majority of practitioners are still not working from a YOT office. While work from home directives were adhered to, the pros and cons of remote work was a recurring theme throughout the survey responses. While viewed as being positive by the majority of YOT staff, remote/hybrid working was also viewed as one of the most significant challenges faced by YOTs across England and Wales. The responses from a group of children involved in the project also demonstrate mixed views about the preference and value of face-to-face and remote working.

At a national level, YOT staff responded that referrals to services had decreased during the early stages of the pandemic, with some evidence that referrals were increasing to pre-pandemic levels. Similarly, the majority of staff indicated that interventions for children had decreased. Referrals and interventions were decreasing in unison with a reporting of changes to children's offending behaviour/s. Staff cited increases in domestic violence, drug use and child criminal exploitation.

Based on the findings described in this paper we consider the following areas to be central for planning how the YOTs can evolve and adapt to deliver a service that recognises and addresses the impact of Covid-19 on the youth justice system, while simultaneously addressing the concerns of YOT staff and seizing the opportunity for change.

- YOTs across England and Wales should consider a review of working practices i.e. the balance between remote working and returning to a dedicated YOT office. A review should include all staff and importantly, children.
- Decreases in referrals to specialist services and interventions will have a detrimental impact on children. YOT Partnership Management Boards should consider undertaking a review of referrals and interventions to gauge at a local level the lengths of delays to services and interventions.
- Consideration should be given to adopting a public health approach to address the impact of Covid-19 on the welfare and vulnerabilities of justice-involved children, with a particular focus on domestic violence and CCE. The commissioning of clinical support is something should be considered by Health Services.

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