



Separation of children in young offender institutions – review of progress

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

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Contents

Introduction..... 3

Section 1 Background..... 4

Section 2 Summary of findings 5

Section 3 Progress against previous recommendations 6

Appendix I Methodology, definition and expectations..... 11

Introduction

While the number of children in YOIs has reduced to fewer than 400, those currently held are some of the most challenging and vulnerable in the country.

In 2020 my predecessor published a thematic report, *Separation of children in young offender institutions*. The findings were shocking: children were subject to widespread solitary confinement, spending more than 22 hours a day locked in their cells with no meaningful human contact or oversight. In response Wendy Morton, the Minister for youth justice said:

‘It is difficult to read this report and not conclude that we are failing some of the children in our care – that is completely unacceptable and I am determined it will not continue.’

It is depressing to find that four years later almost all of these failings continue. In 2023–24, high levels of violence and disorder have dominated young offender institutions (YOIs). As a result, 479 children have been separated from their peers, either because they posed a risk to safety or elected to stay in their cells, mostly because they were concerned about being involved in violence or scared to venture out. While some children have received good support and education, the experience of the majority in youth custody has been bleak.

We found that many children continued to be subject to solitary confinement and unable to access the basics, including exercise. Leaders were unable to provide most separated children with adequate access to education and other interventions, which in some cases were limited to just a few minutes a day. In the worst cases, on some days, children did not leave their cell.

Children's time in custody should provide a vital opportunity to turn their lives around to give them the best chance of leading lives free of crime on release. Sadly, this review finds separated children continue to spend nearly all of their time locked in their cells.

It is a serious indictment of the Youth Custody Service that children continue to be held in what amounts to solitary confinement, four years after we published our thematic report. It is simply not acceptable that they are separated in the conditions we describe in this report, with the potential for long-term detrimental effects on their health, behaviour and learning.

Charlie Taylor

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

August 2024

Section 1 Background

- 1.1 In January 2020 HM Inspectorate of Prisons published a thematic review, *Separation of children in young offender institutions*, which uncovered a dysfunctional system inflicting significant harm on children.
- 1.2 We found that around 10% of children in YOIs were separated from their peers, with most experiencing very long periods of time in their cell with minimal human interaction, many unable to access 'the very basics of daily life', and weaknesses of 'such magnitude that we recommend an entirely new approach, and that current practice be replaced'.
- 1.3 The review included 10 recommendations to support this, of which the Youth Custody Service (YCS) fully accepted six and partially accepted four in their published action plan (*Separation of Children in Young Offender Institutions action plan - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)*).
- 1.4 Our inspection reports have continued to highlight the use and oversight of separation as a concern. During inspections carried out in 2023–24, inspectors assessed progress made against the 10 recommendations. This report provides a summary of our findings.

Section 2 Summary of findings

Use of separation

- 2.1 The average population of YOIs in 2023–24 was 440. We found the use of separation within the YOI estate remained very high. Youth Custody Service data showed there were 1,038 instances of separation involving 480 children. In our surveys of children from 2023–24, nearly two-thirds (64%) reported that being kept locked up and prevented from mixing with other young people was used as a punishment.

Since you have been here, have you ever been kept locked up and stopped from mixing with other young people as a punishment?				
Feltham A	Cookham Wood	Parc	Werrington	Wetherby
50%	76%	63%	70%	61%

Source: HMI Prison children’s survey, YOIs in England and Wales, 2023–24

- 2.2 The duration of separation experienced by children was also high, with 179 instances between 21 days and 100 days, and 21 children separated for over 100 days.
- 2.3 Our inspections have found violence and disorder are major issues in all YOIs holding children. In the absence of effective, motivational behaviour management schemes, the response to this conflict is to separate children. In most instances children who were assessed as posing a risk to others were separated. Children who chose to self-separate, usually because they were too scared of their peers to come out of their cells, made up the remaining cases. We were very concerned to find that these children, who were victims of bullying and violence, were often separated for long periods of time.
- 2.4 The model of separation across the estate varied between sites and within individual YOIs. With the exception of Cookham Wood, all sites had a designated unit. However, at every site we found children separated on normal residential areas in addition to designated units. While still not good enough, the experiences of children held in designated units was consistently better than those separated on normal location.

Section 3 Progress against previous recommendations

In 2020 we made 10 recommendations for improvement. In this section we have outlined the progress made against each recommendation.

Recommendation: The current models of separating children in young offender institutions should be replaced with a new system that ensures a regime that is equivalent to their non-separated peers.

- 3.1 The model of separation and the experiences of children who are separated had not meaningfully changed since our thematic inspection in 2020, and many continued to be separated for long periods of time. Many children were subjected to harmful routines that met the definition of solitary confinement and some of this confinement was prolonged in nature.
- 3.2 During our site visits oversight did not enable national leaders to establish how many children were separated and for how long, and we were provided with several different data sets that contradicted each other. The YCS has since introduced a more detailed central log to address these issues. Local safeguards for separated children involved a large number of cursory checks that too often had little impact on the daily experience of the child involved.

Recommendation: Separated children should have access to an equivalent education day to their non-separated peers. This should include meaningful face-to-face interaction with teachers.

- 3.3 In 2023–24 it remained the case that children who were separated rarely received education. Those who did were not receiving anywhere near the statutory entitlement of 15 hours a week or equivalence with their peers who were not separated. At Cookham Wood, for example, 37 children had been separated for a total of 453 days in one month. These children received just 21 hours of education during this time, an average of fewer than three minutes per child each day. The picture was more encouraging at Feltham A, where some separated children were still able to attend education. However, this was still not normal practice for every child, and the offer of outreach education was not regular or consistent.

Recommendation: Separated children should be able to and encouraged to spend time out of their cell interacting with staff and peers.

- 3.4 At Parc separated children were more likely than at other sites to have access to a productive daily routine. We found some of the most

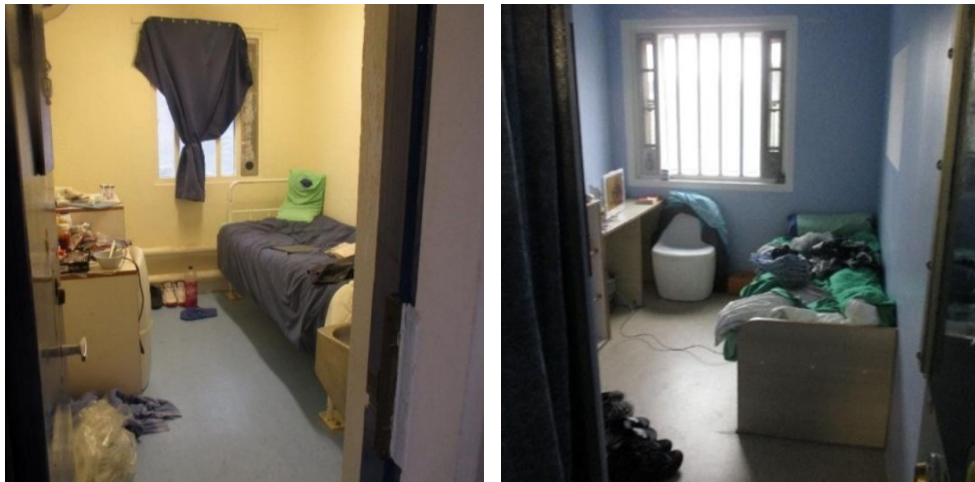
vulnerable engaging in education, enrichment activities and up to nine hours out of their cells. However, even here some had a much more restricted routine of about 90 minutes a day out of their cell. We also found some emerging better practice at Feltham A that included the introduction of yoga and a well-being clinic, mixed with some education and youth work, for some of the separated children.

- 3.5 For most of these children opportunities to spend time interacting with staff and peers rarely took place and they spent nearly all of their time locked up alone in their cells.
- 3.6 Since our thematic inspection, the Phoenix separation unit at Cookham Wood had been closed, and at the time of this review it was designed to operate as an outreach facility for separated children. However, the high number of separated children (a quarter of the population), a lack of staff and poor planning meant many of them could not access the facility, which resulted in limited meaningful daily interactions with staff.
- 3.7 We saw evidence that some children and young people at Cookham Wood almost never came out of their cells. In the worst case a child only had time in the open air on a third of the days separated. Records indicated that this very limited time out of cell was sometimes cancelled because of a child's behaviour or because staff were unable to facilitate it.

Recommendation: Separated children should be able to spend an hour exercising in the open air every day.

Recommendation: Separated children should be able to have a shower and a phone call every day.

- 3.8 We found clear differences in the delivery of daily routines for separated children, both between and within YOIs. Daily routines were most reliable on designated separation units, but those separated on residential units received much less consistency, often because they did not have the resources to provide children with the basics, including daily exercise.



Feltham A segregation unit cell (left) and Cookham Wood segregation cell on the wing (right)

- 3.9 Most cells for separated children contained necessary equipment, but those separated on a main residential area often benefited from an in-cell shower. However, this meant even less time out of their cell or contact with staff. At Wetherby, some cells in the segregation unit had recently been refurbished to include in-cell showers.



Wetherby segregation unit (Anson) cell

- 3.10 Leaders had accepted the recommendation that children should have an hour a day in the open air. However, except at Wetherby's separation unit and Parc, this was often only delivered for half that time, and we found occasions where it was not offered to children every day. The open-air environments differed between YOIs. At Wetherby children spent their outdoor time in a cage-like environment,

while at Cookham Wood children were able to use the same exercise yard as their non-separated peers at different times.



Wetherby segregation yard (left) and Cookham Wood exercise yard (right)

Recommendation: Reintegration planning should start from the day a child is separated and contain practical, timebound targets that are focused on enabling the child to return to a normal regime at the first opportunity.

- 3.11 We found reintegration planning was inadequate, and often did not start on the day of separation.
- 3.12 There was a lack of focus on ending the separation and reintegrating children into social groups, which led to prolonged periods of separation. At Wetherby, plans often discussed moving children to another area of the separation unit called the progression landing. While this was well meaning, it often increased the period of separation.
- 3.13 The limited time out of cell and interaction with others meant that children were given little responsibility or opportunity to demonstrate that their behaviour had improved as part of the reintegration plans.

Recommendation: Safeguards for separated children should involve regular meaningful contact with a manager who has the authority to make changes to the child's situation.

- 3.14 Children should receive daily visits from a manager who has authority to make changes to their situation, as well as receiving other visits from health care and chaplaincy teams. These checks are an important way to safeguard children's well-being, as long periods of separation can significantly impact on mental well-being.
- 3.15 While we found that most checks took place, the majority were not meaningful. In records we reviewed some managers only checked if a

child wished to raise a concern, rather than initiating a conversation or looking for signs of deteriorating mental health or well-being.

- 3.16 At Werrington we were concerned to find children separated without the appropriate authority, such as health care screenings. We saw evidence that some children and young people had recently arrived and had been unofficially separated for several days. We also found two files where the most recent review was absent. We also found evidence that although some children and young people had been taken off separation, unit staff were unaware of the decision, and they had not been returned to a normal routine.

Recommendation: Oversight arrangements should enable national managers to monitor how many children have been separated and for how long, and the regime that these children receive. This information should be published.

- 3.17 Oversight remained inadequate. Data was now being collected centrally, but in most YOIs this did not match local data. For example, at Feltham A the central database recorded 240 episodes of separation for a 12-month period, while the local site recorded 289. We were informed that this was because national leaders did not count certain separations such as 'imposed' or 'supervised' separations.
- 3.18 We also found varying levels of oversight of separation at a local level: meetings did not always take place or were poorly attended. Despite the prevalence of high levels and extended durations of separation, there was a lack of strategic planning to tackle these challenges.

Recommendation: Children who require a mental health assessment should receive one without delay.

Recommendation: Children assessed as needing a mental health bed should be transferred within two weeks, in line with national NHS guidelines.

- 3.19 Children who required a mental health assessment now received one in good time, but despite the efforts of local staff some continued to wait longer than two weeks because there were not enough beds available in hospitals.

Appendix I Methodology, definition and expectations

We visited all five YOIs in England and Wales (all children were transitioned from HMYOI Cookham Wood by the end of May 2024 before it was rerolled to an adult site in July 2024) and reviewed the treatment and conditions of separated children. We reviewed documentation, observed current practice and spoke with children and leaders to form a judgment of progress.

The term ‘separation’ in this report refers to situations where children are unable to mix with their peers or attend activities in the normal way and can include:

- segregation under a specific YOI rule (rule 49)
- a child’s decision to self-isolate from their peers
- the impact of a punishment limiting their access to association and confining them to their cell for long periods.

Any of these can take place in a designated segregation unit or the child’s cell on normal location.

In our expectations for children’s custody – the criteria by which we assess the treatment and conditions of children in detention – we specify that:

- Children are only separated from their peers with the proper authorisation, safely, in line with their individual needs, for appropriate reasons and not as a punishment.
- Children are only separated from others or removed from their normal location with the proper authorisation and are located for appropriate reasons. Separation is not used as a punishment.
- Children whose behaviour requires them to be temporarily separated from others are located in a suitable environment where their individual needs are fully met.

[Expectations – HM Inspectorate of Prisons \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\).](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmip/)

We acknowledge it is sometimes in a child’s best interest to be separated due to the risks posed. When this takes place, we expect managers to make sure separated children are in a unit where they can gain access to the equivalent daily activity, including education, as their non-separated peers. We also expect staff to work with children to address the reasons for their separation and plan for their return to a normal routine as soon as possible.

In our 2020 thematic report (*[Separation of children in young offender institutions](#)*) we outlined evidence given by the British Medical Association on the psychological harm caused by separation, with symptoms increasing with the length of confinement. This included ‘anxiety; depression; hostility, rage and

aggression; cognitive disturbances; hypersensitivity to environmental stimulation; paranoia; and in the most extreme cases, hallucinations and psychosis.' It also noted that children who are isolated even for short durations can experience 'paranoia, anxiety and depression', and that those isolated for extended durations 'are more likely to attempt or commit suicide'.

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