

A commitment to remove under 18's from prison and a plan to develop more appropriate community based arrangements would be a truly radical step for criminal justice in the UK

Rob Allen argues that Chris Grayling has an important opportunity to radically reform how juvenile offenders are treated. Efforts to educate young people and influence them to stay out of trouble in the future are likely to be ineffective in institutional environments which fail to meet their basic needs.



One of the surprise announcements in Chris Grayling's criminal justice speech was a review of the secure facilities for juvenile offenders and a promise to make education more central to the work that they do. He expressed concern at both the costs – five times the fees at a private school – and poor outcomes. Encouragingly in developing his policy he wants to listen to people within education, rather than just the security world.

If he is serious about this, the most obvious step would be to move responsibility for youth custodial facilities out of the Ministry of Justice and into the Department for Education and to set up a new agency to oversee how juveniles are locked up. In 1996 the then Chief Inspector of Prisons recommended that the Prison service should relinquish responsibility for all children under the age of 18. The incoming Labour Government balked at such a radical move, instead giving the newly created Youth Justice Board a role in commissioning places from a variety of providers. Today three quarters of under 18's those locked up are still in prison service Young Offender Institutions (YOI's), with the rest, including all of those under 15 held in local authority secure units or privately run secure training centres.

While there have been improvements in YOI's, recent inspection reports are troubling, showing that custodial institutions have problems in meeting some of the very basic needs of juveniles, let alone producing more positive outcomes. The Chief Inspector of Prisons reported in 2010/11 that in three establishments, external nutritionists had been consulted but young men said they frequently felt hungry. At Feltham YOI last year many areas of the establishment had poor standards of cleanliness, including residential units and cells, the grounds, the segregation unit and health care. At Wetherby YOI there was inadequate access to showers with the lack of daily showers particularly affecting those who worked in dirty areas.

Surveys conducted by the Inspectorate have found just under a third of young men and just over a fifth of young women in YOIs reporting that they had felt unsafe at some point while in prison. In 2009, inspectors described Cookham Wood YOI as frightening. In most establishments, the use of force by staff to control young people is frequent and, in some, bullying between young people is a serious problem. An inspection at Feltham conducted after the 2011 riots found the introduction of some young people to gangs and a violent culture in prison, which they had not previously experienced.

Some of the practices undertaken in custody such as routine strip-searching raise questions of decency and mar efforts by reception staff to reassure new arrivals for whom arriving in custody is a daunting experience. While inspectors find that most young people say that staff treat them with respect young men from black and minority ethnic groups report less favourably. The Chief Inspector has noted that some young people are very negative about the way they are treated.

Efforts to educate young people and influence them to stay out of trouble in the future are likely to be ineffective in institutional environments where some young people do not have enough to eat, cannot keep themselves clean, do not feel safe and are not treated with respect. Children and young persons under 18 represent less than five per cent of the prison population; an organisation whose key priority is to prevent the escape of dangerous adult criminals cannot be expected to provide the level of care,

supervision and support required by teenagers. A commitment to remove under 18's from prison and a transitional plan to develop more appropriate community based and secure arrangements would be a truly radical step. The sustained fall in the numbers of young people in custody over the last five years provides an opportunity to achieve it. Mr Grayling should seize it.

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About the author

Rob Allen works on prison reform in the UK and internationally. From 2005 to 2010 he was director of the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS) at King's College London, undertaking research on imprisonment and assisting prison systems to comply with international standards. He has undertaken prison reform work in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Prior to joining ICPS in March 2005, he ran *Rethinking Crime and Punishment*, an initiative on to change public attitudes to prison and alternatives in the UK. Earlier in his career, Rob was director of research and development at UK charity NACRO. He was a member of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales from 1998 to 2006 and a specialist adviser to the UK Parliament's Justice Committee. He has written widely on youth and criminal justice.

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