

# **Young people meeting judges: What can we learn from a pilot with young people in care proceedings?**

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**This implementation and process evaluation examines the Young People's Participation Pathway (YPPP) – a pilot intervention enabling young people in care proceedings to meet regularly with judges to participate more meaningfully in decisions about their futures.**

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# Executive summary

This implementation and process evaluation examines the Young People's Participation Pathway (YPPP), a pilot intervention enabling young people in care proceedings to meet regularly with judges to participate more meaningfully in decisions about their futures. Four local authorities (LAs) implemented the intervention, facilitating meetings between family court judges and 24 young people going through care proceedings. The evaluation involved interviews with 41 participants: young people (6), judges (5), social workers (10), team managers (5), legal representatives (6), parents (5) and other children's social care professionals (4).

Most young people valued meeting judges, reporting feeling heard, developing trust in the judicial process and gaining a better understanding of court proceedings. Some described reduced anxiety and acceptance of difficult decisions even when outcomes did not align with their wishes. However, the evaluation revealed significant implementation challenges and some unresolved conceptual tensions about the purpose of the YPPP, what young people might be reasonably expected to change about their circumstances, and professional boundaries. Professional perspectives varied considerably. Social workers remained supportive throughout, while judicial views ranged from passionate support to disillusionment. Training for judges was felt to be inadequate, particularly regarding role clarity and managing situations like unexpected disclosures. Successful implementation of the YPPP depended heavily on individual champions rather than sustainable systems.

The evaluation identifies conditions under which benefits materialised: young people having some intrinsic motivation to be heard, adequate preparation across court and LA settings, and skilled judges comfortable with direct engagement. Organic scaling of implementation would require addressing core conceptual issues and developing coordination mechanisms that enable rather than depend on individual commitment.

The pilot operated across two local family justice boards (LFJBs) and four LAs over 18 months, demonstrating that the pathway could be integrated into existing practice. The four LAs facilitated meetings between 24 young people (aged between 10 and 17) across 19 cases and 5 judges, representing approximately 26% of eligible cases in implementing areas. This achievement is noteworthy given the pilot operated entirely through goodwill and reallocation of existing resources.

## Implementation achievements and challenges

The evaluation found several factors that helped the intervention to grow naturally, even without dedicated funding. Where implementation succeeded, this was attributed in part to strategic framing, with leaders presenting YPPP as formalising existing good practice rather than additional burden. Willingness to experiment and learn by doing – rather than seeking complete procedural certainty before starting – distinguished successful sites from those that did not implement the YPPP. Implementation proved more sustainable in sites that integrated YPPP into existing structures (including care planning panels and legal gateway meetings) rather than creating parallel systems. Court clerks played a key enabling role. Their flexibility and responsiveness, alongside judges willing to use lunch breaks and free time due to personal commitment, demonstrated how professional dedication could compensate for the absence of dedicated resources at small scale.

However, there were limits to what goodwill alone could achieve. The intervention as delivered differed from the original model. The most significant of these changes was that Cafcass (the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service whose guardians represent children's wishes and feelings in court) did not participate formally. This meant that children's guardians were largely absent from meetings, the intensive version involving six meetings was not implemented, and most young people met judges only once rather than the intended three times. Poor inter-agency coordination meant documents frequently arrived late or not at all. As a result, whereas social workers and team managers reported that additional workload proved more manageable than anticipated, judges faced additional administrative burden. Ultimately, success proved dependent on individual champions, in both LAs and in the courts, rather than sustainable systems. While manageable at pilot scale, this reliance on passionate individuals would prove unfeasible if the number of cases grew.

## Core conceptual tensions

Beyond implementation logistics, the evaluation revealed conceptual issues. The MyPlan's structure and wording positioned it as a quasi-contractual agreement that risked making children responsible for circumstances beyond their control. Social workers struggled with this contractual framing, and it remains an unresolved tension in the pilot.

Professional boundaries also remained contested throughout. The absence of children's guardians – who hold statutory responsibility for representing children's wishes and feelings in court – created an unusual configuration within the court that inverted traditional professional arrangements. Some judges expressed discomfort about blurring the line between judicial and social work roles, particularly when conversations strayed into what felt like social work territory or when children made unexpected disclosures that judges had no clear protocol for managing.

## Young people's experiences

These implementation challenges are tempered by interviews with six young people that revealed largely positive experiences. Five of the six participants valued the opportunity, describing judges positively and appreciating the chance to be 'dealt with by real people' rather than through anonymous bureaucratic processes that they did not understand and were excluded from. Young people reported feeling heard, developing trust in judges and the court process, and gaining a better understanding of how decisions were made. Some described reduced anxiety about proceedings and, notably, several expressed acceptance of court decisions even when these did not align with their wishes.

However, experiences varied based on motivation and preparation. When preparation was inadequate or judges' language inaccessible, meaningful participation was compromised. The MyPlan process had limited impact, with most young people interviewed having minimal recollection of it six months later. Young people who were primarily motivated by intrinsic desire to participate and have their voices heard by the decision maker described more immediate benefits from taking part than those who were motivated primarily by external incentives such as vouchers. Clearly, motivation in court-based interventions is complex, and it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from the small sample in this case.

## Professional perspectives

Social workers and team managers remained generally supportive throughout, describing the pathway as empowering for children and helping them feel 'done with' rather than 'done to'. Crucially, they emphasised that the additional work was worthwhile if it meant that young people had a voice in care proceedings. This willingness to absorb modest additional responsibilities into existing practice demonstrates the value they felt the pathway brought. Parents interviewed outside the pilot areas were unexpectedly supportive, advocating for children meeting judges multiple times to reduce confusion and mistrust. The parental resistance that some anticipated had largely failed to materialise during the pilot itself.

Judicial perspectives proved more divided. Some judges remained passionate advocates, describing 'hugely beneficial' outcomes and continuing to implement YPPP principles beyond the formal pilot. Others experienced significant discomfort with role boundaries, feeling they were 'walking a tightrope' between judicial independence and inappropriate social work responsibilities.

## Signs of promise and conditions for success

The pilot's achievement in demonstrating that innovation could occur without dedicated funding represents a significant finding in itself. It suggests that when professionals believe in an intervention's value, they will find ways to integrate it into practice. Young people who engaged positively described impacts on mental health and well-being, increased confidence and reduced fear about outcomes.

Judges made small but concrete changes that mattered to young people, demonstrating how judicial authority combined with direct insight could improve young people's quality of life. Beyond individual cases, the pilot appeared to create some moderate cultural shifts, with some judges reporting it made them as a group more focused on children in the family court and resulting in them meeting children more frequently even in standard proceedings outside the YPPP framework.

These benefits emerged when specific conditions aligned: judges needed to be comfortable with direct engagement and skilled at building rapport with young people while maintaining appropriate boundaries; adequate preparation and accessible communication were essential; and basic coordination between LAs and courts was needed for the YPPP to function effectively. The fact that four LAs achieved this without dedicated resources demonstrates feasibility in principle, while variable implementation quality highlights that resources, while not always financial, must include adequate time for coordination, clear role definition and appropriate training.

## Implications for future development

This study reveals a complex picture: some signs of promise tempered by implementation challenges and unresolved conceptual tensions. The pathway's theoretical foundation – that direct engagement between children and judges can enhance procedural justice, reduce anxiety, build trust and improve decision acceptance – appears sound. However, realising this potential requires resolving fundamental questions about purpose (voice versus behaviour change), roles (judicial boundaries and guardian involvement) and sustainable implementation (clear protocols, appropriate training and coordination mechanisms that do not rely on goodwill alone). Additionally, the findings highlight the need for accessible communication from judges and child-friendly physical environments, particularly for neurodivergent young people. Future development should address the core conceptual issues identified while preserving the enabling factors that allowed organic implementation.



# Background and context

In England, around 16,000 children and young people go through care proceedings each year (Cafcass 2025). As part of this, judges make life-changing decisions about where they live, who they are cared for by and who they spend time with. Children and young people are typically involved in these decisions through the ‘tandem system’ of indirect representation where two professionals represent them in court: a solicitor who represents their legal interests and a Cafcass guardian (a trained social worker) who focuses on their welfare needs and ascertains their wishes and feelings (Summerfield 2018). There are avenues available for children and young people to participate in care proceedings directly, including by writing to and meeting with the judge, but these are not widely known about or consistently implemented (Family Justice Council 2010, McFarlane 2025). For some, being represented by adults works well – but for others, including the growing numbers of older children and young people<sup>1</sup> coming to court (Roe et al. 2021), relying on adults to have a meaningful say in decisions can be disempowering. It means that being adequately represented depends on having a good relationship with the professionals who speak for them – and this is not always a given. Taken together, these issues create a participation gap that risks reinforcing feelings of powerlessness for young people who have experienced significant disruption in their lives.

The impetus for developing meaningful participation mechanisms for young people subject to care proceedings has become increasingly urgent due to demographic shifts in the family justice system. Between 2011/12 and 2019/20, the number of adolescents (aged 10–17) subject to care proceedings rose by 95%. Adolescents now constitute 27% of all children in care proceedings in England, compared to 18% nine years earlier. The increases were particularly sharp among older teenagers, coinciding with changes in practice regarding voluntary care arrangements that likely brought more cases to court (Roe et al. 2021), alongside increasing awareness and recognition of risks that predominantly affect older teenagers, including child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. This shift has highlighted an urgent need for more direct participation opportunities, as these young people are simultaneously navigating the transition to adulthood while experiencing one of the most significant disruptions to their lives.

The Young People’s Participation Pathway (YPPP) departs from traditional care proceedings by routinely offering young people the chance to meet regularly with the judge responsible for making decisions about their future. These meetings happen in chambers, without solicitors present, over the course of care proceedings. As part of this, young people complete a ‘MyPlan’ document with their social worker in advance of the meeting to help them convey their views. The YPPP draws its theoretical foundation from the Adolescent Court Project piloted in Coventry and Warwickshire between 2017 and 2020. This earlier initiative explored the potential value of direct engagement

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<sup>1</sup> We refer to ‘young people’ or ‘children and young people’ in relation to the YPPP to reflect the target age group of the intervention but discuss participation more broadly in terms of the more commonly recognised ‘children’s participation’.

between young people and judges through regular meetings supported by a MyPlan but was not formally evaluated. Building on these foundations, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) developed the YPPP model to address the participation gap in care proceedings.

The YPPP pilot launched in two Local Family Justice Board (LFJB) areas in April 2024, to explore whether direct participation could be systematically embedded within existing court processes. This report is the result of an implementation and process evaluation of the YPPP pilot, commissioned by Nuffield FJO and undertaken by Rubric Social Research Ltd. It examines how direct meetings between young people and judges in family court proceedings were delivered across these two areas and what lessons can be learned for potential wider implementation.

## Research and policy context

The YPPP emerges within a policy landscape increasingly focused on strengthening children's participation and developing problem-solving approaches in family proceedings. This has been shaped by various attempts to reform family courts, including Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDAC) and the Pathfinder pilots for private law cases, which have demonstrated that problem-solving approaches can achieve improved outcomes (Foundations 2024). Over the past decade, there have been important developments in relation to children's participation. In 2013, the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) was established to embed young people's voices in system development (Family Justice Board n.d.) and in 2025, President of the Family Division Sir Andrew McFarlane published guidance on judges writing to children, emphasising children's entitlement to receive an accurate and informative account of what was decided in court and why (McFarlane 2025). However, despite these policy commitments and initiatives, evidence suggests that children's participation, and the professional support needed to enable it, remains inconsistent in practice.

## Young people's participation challenges

Despite three decades of legislative development since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), empirical research consistently reveals substantial gaps between policy aspirations and practice realities when it comes to children's participation. Contemporary research paints a stark picture characterised by tokenistic involvement and systematic exclusion of children from decision making about their lives. Research conducted by the Nuffield FJO with care-experienced young people raised concerns about their experiences in court. Young people consistently expressed feeling unheard, excluded and poorly informed during proceedings (Roe et al. 2021). They described the court system as confusing (Cossar et al. 2016) and disempowering (Krinsky and Rodriguez 2005), suggesting it failed to recognise the complexity of their lives. This participation gap represented not merely a procedural shortcoming but a fundamental challenge to young people's rights and well-being.

Toros and Falch-Eriksen's (2024) comprehensive systematic review found that children's participation in social care settings is frequently tokenistic with limited influence on outcomes, while their views are often filtered or minimised in

documentation and decision-making processes. This pattern extends across different types of proceedings and review mechanisms. Foster et al. (2021) found limited opportunities for young people to participate in child protection conferences, while Pert et al. (2017) found that even when children in care did attend review meetings, they felt they had limited impact on decisions about their lives.

Professional attitudes and practices emerge as critical determinants of children's participation opportunities. Race and Frost (2022) identified pervasive 'yes, but' attitudes among professionals who express commitment to child-centred practice while simultaneously identifying reasons for limiting children's involvement. Motivations for doing so included concerns about re-traumatisation and stress, notions of preserving childhood innocence, and respecting parental privacy. This ambivalence reflects deeper tensions where protection and welfare of children is prioritised over hearing and taking seriously their views. Social workers play a key role in determining whether young people's views are taken seriously, with Bruce (2014) highlighting wide variation in professional values and skills as well as heavy workloads often limiting meaningful engagement with young people.

Research consistently highlights that children in care want to play a meaningful role in decision making but encounter systematic barriers preventing this (Edwards 2012). Duncan (2019) found that statutory interventions are often experienced negatively by children. Participation is deeply relational, with Cossar, Brandon and Jordan (2016) emphasising that the quality of relationships between young people and social workers has a major impact on whether young people can participate meaningfully. Adults also often underestimate children's capacity to think clearly and have coherent, measured views of their life and future: Costa and Sani (2024) found that professionals often discourage involvement, doubting children's competence to make sensible choices.

At the systemic level, Harrison and Barker (2024) identified a lack of clear guidance as a consistent obstacle to children's involvement. Organisational challenges including high caseloads, staff turnover and limited training also restrict participation, with Diaz et al. (2019) noting that time pressures and an inexperienced children's social care workforce often impact negatively on children having a voice. But several factors can enhance children's participation including relationship quality – the most consistent facilitator (Diaz et al. 2019) – alongside high-quality training and a supportive organisational culture willing to take risks.

## Young people meeting judges

Given the barriers to children's participation identified above, direct contact between children and judicial decision makers represents a potentially significant avenue for ensuring children's voices are heard. In England and Wales, it is possible for judges to meet children about whom they are making decisions, though this practice has never been systematically implemented. Family Justice Council guidelines emphasise that meetings are primarily intended to help children feel connected to proceedings and understand the judge's role rather than to gather evidence and must not lead children to believe they are responsible for the court's decision (Family Justice Council 2010). Ministerial aspirations for it to become 'the norm' for children aged 10 and older to have access to judges were never formally implemented, and at the time of writing, no comprehensive national statistics exist on how frequently judges meet children. System stakeholders, however, report that the practice remains exceptional rather than routine. Resource constraints limited judicial training and continued reliance on Cafcass as the primary mechanism for ascertaining children's views are often cited as limiting direct judicial engagement.

Internationally, the practice of children meeting judges varies. New Zealand leads the way with the most established practice (Family Court of New Zealand 2007). Research by Caldwell (2011) found that 65% of Family Court judges often, very often or always meet with children in parenting disputes. Scotland shows similar openness, with most surveyed judges reporting being willing to speak with children if requested (Raitt 2011). However, expressed willingness does not necessarily translate into routine practice. A study of Australian judges found they rarely meet children directly, with only 20% reporting having ever done so (Parkinson and Cashmore 2007) and, in contrast with Raitt's study, most reporting reluctance to hear children's views directly in custody cases (Fernando 2009, Parkinson and Cashmore 2007). Professional concerns tend to centre on skills deficits, fears that parents might pressure or manipulate children, and due process concerns about transparency (Parkinson and Cashmore 2007, Fernando 2009).

By contrast, qualitative research consistently demonstrates children's strong theoretical desire for direct judicial contact. In an Australian study, 85% of children said children should have opportunities to speak with judges (Parkinson et al. 2007). Children's motivations for seeking direct contact include wanting unfiltered voices to be heard by decision makers, a desire for acknowledgement and respect, and the belief that direct communication leads to better decisions (Parkinson et al. 2007, Fernando 2009). Most children have realistic expectations and express mature understanding that their views constitute one factor among many (Parkinson et al. 2007). There is also some emerging evidence that involving children in proceedings more comprehensively and earlier on might lead to swifter resolution of hearings.

However, empirical research on the impact of child participation remains limited, relying mostly on professional surveys rather than systematic evaluation. One notable exception is an Israeli government pilot (2006–2009) that established dedicated child participation sections staffed by social workers within Family Court Social Services (Morag et al. 2012). The model allowed children to choose between meeting judges directly or conveying their views through social workers. The study found evidence of considerable gatekeeping: of 448 eligible children, only 36% were referred despite regulations requiring universal referral. Of those referred, 48% (215 children) attended to give their views – and the main reason for not participating was parental opposition.

Where direct meetings did occur, judges reported they contributed to their understanding of the case in 54% of instances and children who participated reported high levels of satisfaction and acceptability: nearly all (93%) thought being given the chance to meet the judge was beneficial (Morag et al. 2012).

The emerging evidence on judicial meetings with children suggests this represents a potentially promising approach to addressing participation deficits, though significant research gaps remain. Empirical research is characterised by small studies without comparison groups and methodological limitations. This evidence base provides important context for understanding both the need for and potential value of innovative approaches such as the YPPP.

## Study rationale and design

This study was a realist-informed implementation and process evaluation, examining not just whether the pilot worked, but how it worked, for whom, under what conditions and why. We used mixed methods with a qualitative emphasis to understand how the YPPP was delivered and implemented. Our research questions were:

- What are the key ingredients of the pathway?
- How was it delivered in each region?
- How was the pathway experienced by those who implement, deliver and participate in it?
- What signs of promise exist in relation to supporting young people to be involved in decision making? And what are the key messages for a future impact evaluation?

The project design and data collection materials were developed in consultation with the FJYPB. We used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore stakeholder experiences of implementing and participating in the YPPP. This report is based on qualitative data from 41 participants and on quantitative throughput data from a sample of local authorities (LAs) from whom data was available. The quantitative element was initially expected to be more significant, but issues with data access and sharing from LAs meant this became limited to a simple description of throughput and basic demographics.

Most interviewees (77%) participated in just one interview, with a small number of professionals who were particularly involved (programme lead, project leads, designated family judges) participating in two interviews (one at the start of the pilot and another at the end) to capture their evolving perspectives. The table below provides a breakdown of who took part and how.

**Table 1: Participants by role and method of data collection**

<b>Participant role</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Participants (n)</b>
Cafcass guardian	Interviews	1
Judge	Interviews	5
Legal representative	Interviews	6
Programme lead	Interviews	1
Project lead	Interviews	2
Parent	Focus group	5
Social worker	Interviews	10
Social work team manager	Interviews	5
Young person	Interviews	6
<b>Total</b>		<b>41</b>

Interview participants came from six LAs across the two participating areas. The focus group participants were from three LAs not involved in the pilot, including one in Wales and two in England, and were used to assess acceptability among parents with experience of non-YPPP proceedings. Professional participants were 77% female (n=27). The young people interviewed ranged in age from 11 to 16 years, and the average age was 14. Young people who participated were 83% female (n=5). The five parents who participated were 80% female (n=4).

All interviews were conducted online and transcribed verbatim for analysis. We analysed data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) guided by the implementation outcome framework developed by Proctor et al. (2011), focusing on six key categories: acceptability, adoption, appropriateness, feasibility, fidelity and sustainability. We initially coded transcripts by participant group individually, then cross-referenced findings as a team to identify convergent and divergent themes across stakeholder perspectives. This analysis fed into the development of a logic model outlining how the intervention works in theory. Full details of the study methodology are provided in the appendices.



# Defining the YPPP: What is the pathway and how is it thought to work?

This chapter examines what was intended to be delivered versus what was delivered in practice. The pilot was designed as a learning experience, with LAs and LFJBs adapting the model to fit their local contexts. We summarise the key changes here to provide background for understanding the logic model, with detailed discussion in subsequent chapters.

## What is the YPPP? The model in theory

The YPPP is a court-based intervention that gives young people involved in care proceedings the chance to play a more meaningful role in decisions that affect them. It aims to address the interconnected problems discussed above: that many young people involved in the family court report that they do not feel in control of decisions being made about them, they are not actively involved in the process and their views are not listened to.

The YPPP responds to these issues through structured meetings between the young person, judge and social worker throughout proceedings, designed to give the young person a better understanding of care proceedings and more of a voice in decision making. It helps them understand how the court works and how decisions about their long-term care are made, through meeting directly with the judge, ideally on several occasions.

The YPPP used by the Nuffield FJO is adapted from a model originally developed and piloted in Coventry and Warwickshire. Its theoretical underpinnings, key principles and practical guidance are set out in the *YPPP Handbook* (Nuffield FJO 2024); this was circulated to LAs to support them in piloting the pathway. In the next section, we outline the core components of the intervention, as set out in the handbook, and the aims of the pilot, before comparing this with what was delivered.

### Core components

According to the handbook, the intervention is structured around four core components designed to facilitate direct participation:

- **Direct judicial meetings:** A meeting between young people and the judge responsible for their case in chambers, without legal representatives present. Young people choose whether to have their social worker or another trusted adult present. Meetings focus on building rapport, explaining court processes and discussing the young person's views. The original model expected LAs would offer two modes of

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participation, based on judicial capacity. The 'standard' version involved an initial 'signing up' meeting followed by three meetings (initial, midway and final) with the judge, whereas the 'intensive' mode involved six meetings. These were not expected to be formally recorded, but a note of the discussion taken and circulated to all parties.

- **MyPlan:** A document that young people complete with their social worker before meeting the judge. The MyPlan enables young people to articulate their goals, priorities and concerns in their own words, and was expected to form part of the LA's final care plan. During proceedings, the judge reviews the MyPlan, receives updates on the support being provided and checks progress towards agreed goals.
- **Schedule of support and services:** A document created by the social worker and the young person that lists specific services, therapies and support mechanisms available to help the young person achieve their MyPlan goals. It should be shared with all parties to monitor whether promised support is being delivered.
- **Training for judges:** Specialised training for judges that incorporates trauma-informed approaches and techniques. Drawing on motivational interviewing principles, judges are trained to use OARS techniques (open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, summaries) to support meaningful communication while demonstrating empathy and promoting young people's sense of choice and control.

## Referral process and eligibility criteria

LAs were responsible for identifying eligible young people and referring them to the YPPP at the pre-proceedings gateway stage, before formal court proceedings began. To be referred, young people needed to be between 12 and 17 years old, have capacity to consent to participate and be willing to take part in the process. The child's social worker would discuss with them whether they wanted to be involved in the pathway.

When the LA filed its court application, it was expected to upload a form notifying the court that the case was a YPPP case and enabling the application to be sent to the designated YPPP judge for gatekeeping review. The handbook does not prescribe who would be responsible for coordinating and scheduling the meetings from this point. Instead, it recognised that specific implementation would likely vary across LA sites as teams adapted the pathway to fit their context and work within their wider practice models.

## Anticipated timeline and fit with care proceedings

In practical terms, the pathway was expected to operate within the standard Public Law Outline (PLO) court process, starting at week 0 when proceedings are issued and progressing through to the final hearing around week 26. The intervention was structured around three key stages aligned with this timeline: an initial meeting, a midway review and a final meeting.

At the initial case management hearing or first hearing, the YPPP judge was expected to discuss the pathway with the parents and young person, explaining its expectations, how the young person would be involved and what support would be offered. If all parties agreed, the young person would meet with the judge in weeks 2–3 and begin the YPPP. In the intervening period, they would complete the MyPlan and the schedule of support and services with their social worker.



At the initial meeting the judge would meet with the young person and talk about the MyPlan, the schedule, the frequency of their meetings and the next steps. The handbook specifies that this is 'a formal signing up to the pathway by the young person and judge' (YPPP Handbook, p.25). At week 10, a midway review was planned. The young person would meet with the judge to identify what has been going well and not going so well and agree what the next stage of the plan should be. This was intended to provide an opportunity to adjust the plan based on progress and emerging needs. At week 26, coinciding with the final hearing, the young person would either attend the final hearing or meet the judge to discuss the final care plan. Post-court, the children's guardian or social worker would ensure that the independent reviewing officer (IRO) had a copy of the MyPlan, embedding the young person's goals into their ongoing care arrangements.

## What was delivered? The model in practice

Various changes meant that what we have evaluated differs from what was intended to be delivered. We discuss these in terms of fidelity but it is important to note that the pilot was intended to generate learning, with LAs and LFJBs adapting the model to fit their local contexts and ways of working. In this section we summarise the changes made, to provide essential background to understanding the logic model and chapters that follow. They are discussed in more detail in the implementation chapter.

### Key programme-wide changes

The following changes to the model were implemented across both LFJBs:

**Little to no involvement from children's guardians:** Cafcass did not participate formally in the pilot or this evaluation. This was the most significant change from the intended multi-professional collaborative model that was designed to include young person, judge, social worker and guardian. This meant that meetings did not usually involve children's guardians. However, there was variation in practice between regions: in one LFJB guardians did not attend, but in the other they took a more flexible approach locally with guardians present at the discretion of the judge and with the child's agreement.

**No use of the intensive version of participation:** Another significant change related to how many times judges met with young people, as none of the participating LAs implemented the intensive six-meeting option. This was primarily due to capacity constraints – for judges and social workers, who both felt it was unworkable – and concerns regarding the appropriateness of the higher frequency option for young people.

**Most young people only met the judge once:** Interview findings suggest that most young people who took part in the YPPP only met a judge once instead of three times during the pilot period. This could be because, in some cases, proceedings were not finished by the end of data collection, but qualitative data from young people and professionals suggested that there were other motivators for young people to stop participating after a single meeting. These are discussed further in the implementation chapter.

**Lowering of age criteria:** Pilot sites came together and agreed to modify the eligibility criteria for young people, lowering the minimum age from 12 to 10 in December 2024.

Some LAs felt that younger children, specifically those aged 10 and in Year 6, could benefit from the intervention.

**Non-implementation of certain aspects of the YPPP:** The schedule of support and services document, designed to coordinate multiagency support for MyPlan goals, was not used within any pilot sites, nor discussed in any interviews. It appears to be a part of the intervention that was not implemented. The intended initial 'signing up' meeting was also not implemented and was combined with the first YPPP meeting, merging what was originally planned as two separate meetings into a single encounter.

### Other local or regional adaptations

Some changes to the model were made locally without being part of the national pilot framework. These are minor and do not represent deviations from the model per se, but are local adaptations. Changes made by LAs included:

**Material incentives:** In one LFJB, LAs offered financial incentives to encourage young people to take up the opportunity to participate in the YPPP. One LA provided vouchers for young people after the first meeting, while another offered incentives after completing three meetings.

**Documentation modifications:** Some LAs tailored YPPP documentation to align with local practice models and improve accessibility for young people. Changes included shifting from writing 'about the child' to writing 'to the child', reducing document length and using child-centred language. One LA created a single MyPlan document to replace three separate plans, reducing workload while maintaining essential elements.

Courts also developed several adaptive responses to emerging issues during implementation:

**Safety protocols:** Following incidents involving challenging behaviours, courts developed safety protocols, creating necessary safeguards not anticipated in the original design. Some judges reported feeling vulnerable with older young people exhibiting difficult behaviours, leading to the development of new procedures to manage these situations (e.g. not meeting in chambers).

**Sibling meetings:** For cases involving siblings, courts adapted the process so judges met with young people separately after initial joint meetings to give them the opportunity to meet on their own without worrying about their siblings telling family members or other people what they had said.

The evaluation revealed that what was actually delivered differed from the original model. It is important to note that in the next section (where we set out the logic model and a programme theory of how the intervention works), we are reporting largely on children having met judges once, and on the YPPP as it was implemented in practice, with certain aspects changed or not implemented. These variations between intended and actual implementation reflect the complex realities of introducing novel interventions within established court systems.

# How does the YPPP work?

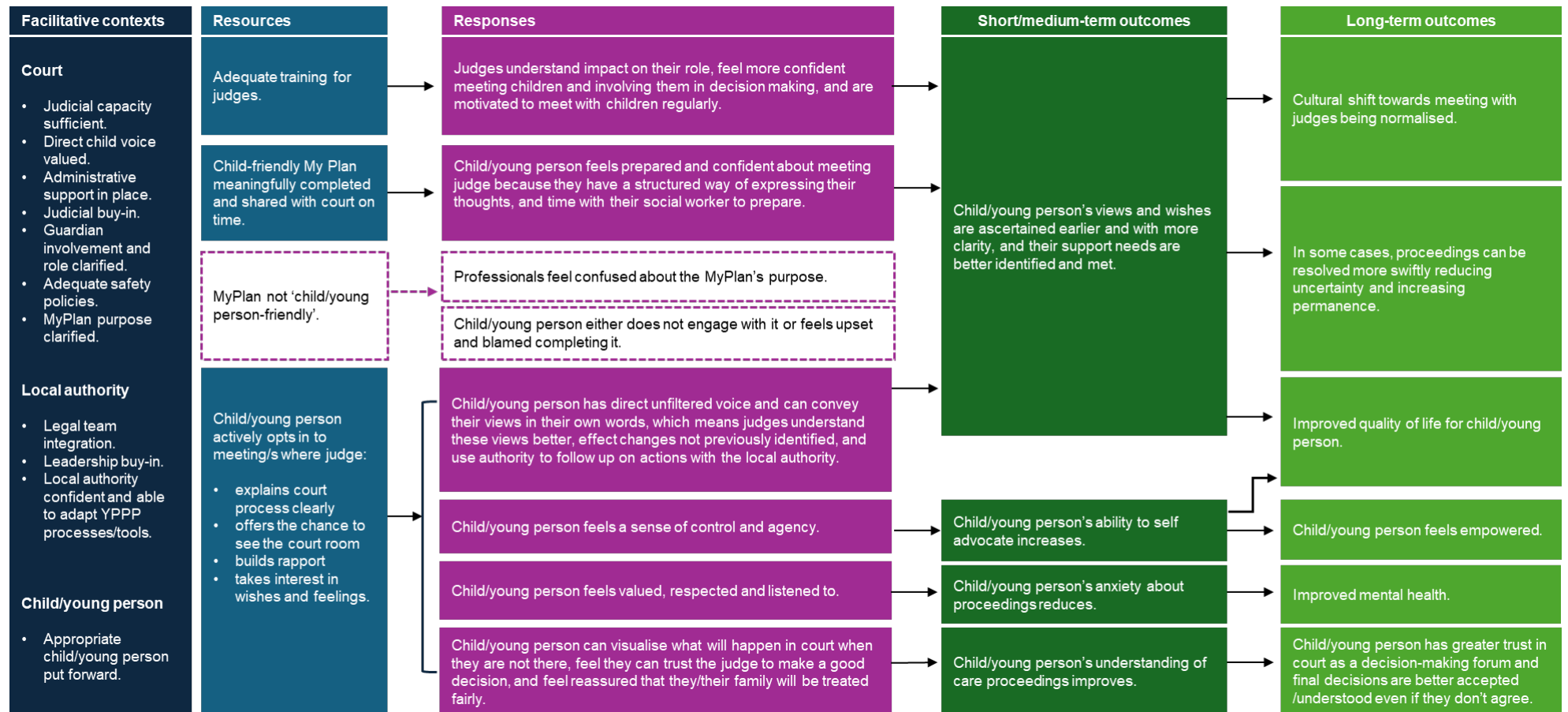
## Logic model

A logic model is a visual representation of how a programme or intervention is expected to work. Logic models illustrate the 'if-then' relationships that form the foundation of a programme's theory of change.

The YPPP logic model (Figure 1 overleaf) comprises five key components:

- **'Facilitating contexts'** describe the essential preconditions and enabling conditions required for the intervention to function effectively. These represent the organisational, systemic and individual-level factors that create an environment conducive to change.
- **'Resources'** constitute the specific intervention inputs – the tangible components that are made available as a result of the YPPP and that make change possible when facilitating contexts are present.
- **'Responses'** are the immediate psychological, relational and behavioural changes that occur when a resource is made available. Together, resources and responses form the mechanism through which change occurs – the causal processes that explain how the YPPP produces its effects.
- **'Outcomes'** are the changes the intervention aims to achieve. These are split into short and medium-term outcomes, and long-term outcomes representing the sustained impact the intervention aims to achieve.
- **'Backfires'** (represented by red boxes and red arrows) are unintended negative consequences that occur when facilitating contexts are absent, when resources are poorly implemented or when responses do not materialise as expected.

Figure 1: YPPP logic model



## Programme theory

A programme theory explains the underlying assumptions about how and why a programme is expected to work. While the logic model provides a visual map, the programme theory provides the narrative explanation of pathways to change.

Certain contexts or conditions are needed for the intervention to work. Courts need sufficient capacity, judges committed to participatory approaches, and administrative systems that effectively coordinate between courts and LAs. There needs to be clarity about roles, adequate safety policies and LA leadership support. The MyPlan needs to facilitate young people's engagement in a meaningful way.

With the facilitating contexts present, the programme theory articulates how specific intervention resources trigger responses (changes in how people think, feel or behave). These are expressed as if-then statements that articulate the causal mechanisms – the 'if-then-because' logic – that link YPPP activities to intended outcomes.

The logic model presents six primary causal pathways through which the YPPP was theorised to produce outcomes. In reality, these pathways are more complex and interconnected than the simplified representation suggests. For instance, having a structured way to express thoughts (an immediate response) would be expected to improve young people's ability to self-advocate (a short-term outcome), which in turn could enhance their sense of agency. Similarly, demystification of court processes might simultaneously reduce anxiety (well-being), increase trust in decision-making forums, and improve outcome acceptance. The arrows shown represent the core theorised mechanisms, but multiple feedback loops exist between elements. We have prioritised clarity and readability, mapping the most direct relationships while acknowledging that the actual processes through which participation produces (or fails to produce) outcomes involve considerable interplay between elements.

## Causal pathways

### 1. Acceptance through validation

*If young people meet the judge, build rapport and feel genuinely heard, then they are more likely to accept the court's decision (even if unfavourable) because they feel validated and respected in the process.*

When young people meet judges who show genuine interest in their wishes and feelings, they experience being valued, respected and listened to. This creates a powerful dynamic where the experience of fair treatment and meaningful participation becomes important, as well as the actual outcome. The theory suggests that feeling validated and respected in the process enables young people to accept and understand final decisions even when these do not align with their wishes, because the quality of their participation matters as well as the result.

### 2. Reduced anxiety through concrete understanding

*If young people meet the judge and the court process is explained clearly, then their anxiety about proceedings will reduce because they understand what is happening to them and their families and can visualise what will happen in court.*

Where processes are explained clearly, the YPPP helps young people visualise what will happen in court, reducing fear of the unknown. When judges take time to show courtrooms and explain proceedings, young people understand what to expect for

themselves and their parents. This concrete knowledge transforms an abstract, frightening process into something comprehensible, reducing anxiety.

### **3. Trust through demystification and humanisation of judges**

*If judges build rapport with young people during meetings, then young people will see judges as real people who are thoughtfully and carefully considering their future, leading to reassurance that they will be treated fairly and increased trust in the legal process.*

Meetings designed to build rapport, transform judges from remote authority figures engaged in bureaucracy into accessible individuals who care about children's futures. This builds trust in the legal process through personal connection and dispels myths and stereotypes about the judiciary. The process also satisfies young people's natural curiosity about court proceedings.

### **4. Empowerment through voice and ownership**

*If young people have direct communication with the judge and feel their voice matters, then they will feel empowered, develop a sense of ownership over their situation, and their ability to advocate for themselves will increase because being listened to validates their experiences and gives them agency.*

This pathway makes a distinction between filtered and unfiltered communication. When young people speak directly to judges in their own words, they gain 'direct, unfiltered voice' that judges can better understand and act on. This creates genuine agency, developing their ability to self-advocate: learning that their voice matters in the most formal of settings teaches them it can matter everywhere.

### **5. Better identification of support needs through unfiltered insight and judicial authority**

*If child-friendly MyPlans are completed meaningfully and shared with the court on time, then judges can make more informed decisions and effect tangible change, because they have direct, unfiltered insight into children's circumstances and can use their authority to follow up on actions with LAs, ultimately improving the quality of life for young people.*

A powerful two-part mechanism sets this intervention apart from others. First, judges hear directly what young people need rather than what professionals interpret they need. Second, judicial authority provides the enforcement mechanism often missing from other approaches. This distinguishes the intervention from other participation mechanisms that may gather children's views but lack power to ensure action.

### **6. Cultural change through judicial confidence and role clarity**

*If training for judges is supportive, appropriate and effective, then they will better understand their role in the context of the YPPP, feel confident and motivated about meeting young people, and contribute to a cultural shift towards children meeting with judges more often.*

This pathway describes how individual transformation aggregates into systemic change: as more judges gain confidence and clarity, meeting children shifts from an exceptional practice to an expected norm, creating a 'cultural shift towards normalising judicial meetings with young people.'

### **Critical tensions and backfire pathways**

The programme theory also acknowledges points where the logic can break down, for example if the MyPlan is not a ‘young-people-friendly’ tool, professionals may be confused about its purpose and young people may not engage in the process of completing it. The programme theory thus reveals that successful implementation requires not just the presence of resources but careful attention to how these are deployed, understood and experienced by all stakeholders.

### **Summary**

At its core, this programme theory proposes that when judges engage young people as individuals – explaining processes clearly, listening and using their authority to secure meaningful changes – three interconnected changes can occur. First, the court system itself becomes more understandable, reducing the anxiety that comes from facing an unknowable bureaucratic machine. Second, judges stop feeling like distant authority figures and start to seem like real people who genuinely care about young people’s situations. That helps build trust in them and the system they are part of. Third, young people gain not just voice but agency: the experience of being heard by someone powerful validates their capacity to participate meaningfully in decisions, fostering self-advocacy skills that extend beyond the courtroom. However, the model also reveals a critical tension: these benefits depend on delicate preconditions including judicial role clarity, appropriate training, meaningful documentation tools and young people’s engagement. When these elements are absent or misaligned, direct engagement risks causing harm rather than benefit.

The intervention operates through a logic of procedural justice: if the structures, relationships and tools of the court process itself become more accessible and participatory, then young people will experience improved well-being, greater acceptance of decisions and enhanced capacity for self-advocacy – regardless of whether substantive outcomes align with their initial – or even eventual – preferences (Cashmore 2024).



# Experiencing the YPPP: How did young people experience the pathway?

This chapter presents findings drawn from interviews with young people. This is followed by a summary of professional observations of children's experiences, engagement and outcomes. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used here and throughout this report. In this section, we specify the number of participants expressing particular views, and the overall sample, to be transparent about the small sample. While a large proportion (e.g. 5 of 6) may suggest a particular view was strongly held among the sample, it should not be taken as evidence of generalisability.

## Part 1: How did young people experience the YPPP and what were the perceived benefits, if any, of participating?

Six young people aged 11–16 were interviewed across three LA areas about their experiences of meeting judges in care proceedings. All had met their judge at least once; two had attended three meetings. Proceedings had concluded for three participants; the other three were ongoing.

### Experiences

#### Motivation and expectations

Young people were motivated to take part in the YPPP primarily for two reasons: in the hope of influencing the outcome of their case and because of a desire to have their voices heard. For some, the opportunity to meet the person making decisions about them was important in and of itself: 'I just felt I needed to meet that person who was going to make that decision about my life' (Georgia). For others, it was because they wanted to affect the outcome, for themselves or for siblings: 'I thought that by speaking to the judge that the kids [my siblings] would be able to go back... like [there'd be] a higher possibility that we could go home.' Of the six young people interviewed, half (n=3) made specific reference to being motivated by the opportunity to affect the outcome of proceedings. The other half (n=3) wanted to take part in the project 'to say it in my own words' (Charlie) with hopes that the judge would 'listen to my opinion' (Georgia).

While the two motivations were commonly intertwined, notably, none of the young people expressed an expectation that meeting the judge would result in them getting their preferred outcome. This perhaps highlights an understanding of the aims of the



project and a desire to be actively involved in shaping their future, to be part of the decision-making forum alongside professionals and to have their views taken seriously even in the knowledge that they may not get their desired outcome. Indeed, four of the six young people were asked what the project was aiming to achieve, and all were able to articulate an understanding of the YPPP's participatory goals.

Another important aspect of motivation was the introduction of external incentives to encourage participation. Two young people, who reported less positive experiences of the YPPP overall than their peers, and who found the process 'boring' (Millie) or not informative (Lucia), also reported their sole motivation for taking part being to receive an external reward, such as a voucher or a meal at McDonald's. This may tentatively suggest, due to the low numbers involved, that participants primarily motivated by external incentives gained less from the project than those who held intrinsic motivations to be heard by the judge.

Motivation, however, proved more complex than a simple binary between intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. For the two young people explicitly citing external incentives as the primary motivation, both had been through previous care proceedings. Millie had difficulty talking about her mother and described having already discussed these topics repeatedly with professionals over six years in care, all of which might have contributed to her labelling the meeting 'boring'. Both Millie and Lucia said that the judge told them things they already knew, another contributing factor. Lucia felt he was 'stupid [for] not knowing that I already knew that.' For Lucia, this may reflect knowledge gained from her earlier care proceedings, or frustration that her existing understanding was not recognised.

However, it is important to note that emphasis on external rewards does not necessarily indicate lack of interest in participation or preclude meaningful engagement. Millie, for example, despite saying she 'already knew everything', also reported feeling 'better' and 'more comfortable' after the meetings and gaining greater understanding of her situation. Rather, the focus on incentives over the intrinsic value of being heard may reflect other contextual factors, including prior negative experiences with the care system, protective distancing from emotionally difficult content, or distrust developed through earlier proceedings. Understanding the motivations and expectations of young people is important for interpreting nuances in the perceived impact of the YPPP.

Social workers also recognised the value of external incentives in engaging young people with the process: 'What persuaded them, especially Laurence, to complete it was £25 that our local authority gave a child if they participated in it.' (Mandy). Others used different types of incentives, for example by framing participation as a special occasion (rather than simply another professional meeting) by making 'a bit of a day of it' (Lucy) and taking young people out for food before or after court (Tanya). Another explicitly acknowledged that for the child who she supported, the train journey itself became the primary draw: 'the train was definitely the carrot' (Yvette). These observations suggest that external incentives of different types serve multiple functions: they can lower barriers to participation for those who might otherwise be reluctant and help frame the experience positively for young people. Taken together with young people's own accounts, this suggests that the complex issue of motivation in the context of family court initiatives targeted at young people should be explored further.

### **The MyPlan**

The process of completing a MyPlan appeared to have a limited impact on enabling meaningful participation, although it did offer some a chance to prepare for the meeting

with the judge. Four of six young people had minimal recollection of the MyPlan, its purpose or discussing it with the judge. Two appeared to confuse it with other activities undertaken with their social worker, although the six months between the conclusion of proceedings and their research interview might have contributed to this. Another two young people held only vague recollections of the plan's content and subsequent discussion with the judge.

Conversely, two young people spoke positively about the MyPlan. They valued it for helping them express and organise their views before meeting the judge. For one young person, this preparation reduced anxiety and the pressure to speak their views aloud straightaway in the meeting: 'I found it good because it had loads of questions about what the judge was gonna ask me that I didn't have to say out loud' (Mia).

While the MyPlan process shows promise as a tool for preparing some young people for court proceedings, the fact that most could not recall its content or use suggests an issue with implementation both with social workers before court and again in discussion with the judge. This highlights a need for refinement to ensure meaningful engagement and preparation for young people.

### **Meeting the judge**

Young people consistently reported initial apprehension before attending court to meet with the judge. One described feeling 'a bit nervous because he was obviously going to change the rest of my life on his own decision... so I was pretty nervous to go' (Alex). This reflected young people's understanding of the weight of the court's decisions and the impact this could have on their lives.

Young people's accounts indicate they found judges approachable and informative about court processes and decision making. The judge's approachability proved crucial: five of six participants spoke positively about their judge, describing them as 'friendly' (Charlie), 'nice' (Millie) or 'lovely' (Georgia). This combination – personable, friendly judges who were humanised through meetings – helped young people understand how courts work and decisions are made. Indeed, direct engagement appeared important for breaking down stereotypes, humanising judges and setting young people at ease. For one, meeting the judge provided reassurance that their circumstances were being carefully considered and their situation taken seriously by a 'real person': 'It was nice for me to know I was being dealt with by real people and not someone sat behind a desk with a tick sheet... getting that personal touch' (Georgia).

While views of judges were predominantly positive, experiences varied. Millie said: 'I thought court was very boring... I didn't like it.' Another was more ambivalent, describing the judge as 'just a normal human, like all of us' (Lucia), suggesting neither fear nor reassurance from the experience. This young person felt they gained little overall, with ambivalence and motivation likely contributing factors. Another young person, who found the judge agreeable overall, struggled with inaccessible language, agreeing to actions without understanding the terminology used and without feeling confident enough to ask for clarification: 'I felt like I should agree, but I didn't want to agree because I didn't know what it was, but I still did' (Mia). This suggests that even where judges create an informal, relaxed atmosphere, the use of complex legal terminology can undermine young people's ability to genuinely engage with decisions affecting their lives. The disconnect between procedural informality and linguistic accessibility points to the need for judges to receive specific training on age-appropriate communication, ensuring that simplicity in language matches informality in approach so that young

people can fully understand what they are agreeing to and feel empowered to ask for clarification when needed.

## **Perceived impact**

### **Feeling heard and being able to participate**

A central theme was the importance of feeling heard and having the opportunity to participate in decisions that directly affect their lives. Participants valued the opportunity to express their opinions and have them taken seriously. Some young people explained how the judge had made them feel listened to:

‘I wanted him to know that I wanted to stay living in the care home where I am living now. I don’t want to move again and I wanted him to know that. So I wrote that down and he read it and I think he took it seriously.’ (Charlie)

The young person’s confidence that their views were received ‘seriously’ suggests that the pilot not only provided a platform for expression but also instilled a sense of agency. This underscores the empowering potential of the YPPP. Indeed, for one young person direct engagement with the judge had further-reaching implications for their trust in relationships with adults. One trusted adult explained this during a joint interview with a young person who took part:

Trusted adult: ‘What I know is that it’s perhaps given Charlie the trust that they are being listened to, that adults around them are finally listening to him. The judge really cares what happens to them and that makes a big difference... cares about what they want. I think that has added to Charlie’s confidence to continue to share their wishes and feelings and trust us.’

Charlie: ‘I agree with that... what she just said’

This suggests that the YPPP has the potential to foster a shift in the young person’s perception of their agency and relationship with authority figures, extending beyond the immediate context of the care proceedings. Such shifts could have lasting effects on future interactions and willingness to engage with systems designed to support, as well as foster confidence within, young people.

### **Trusting the judge and outcome**

The YPPP appeared to cultivate a sense of trust in the judge and the court’s decision-making process. This links to other findings such as acceptance of the outcome. This was attributable to building a relationship with the judge and understanding more about how they were making decisions. Most young people reported feeling reassured that the judge had their best interests at heart. One described how this felt:

‘I wasn’t frightened of the outcome anymore. The judge explained the outcome of the session was for my best interests and it was to look after me and safeguard me and that made me feel more at ease. I knew I was in good hands. I’m going to be in a place where I can get the most help and support... I felt I could put all my trust in her because I knew she’d do something good for me.’ (Mia)

Developing this sense of trust was a profound change for this young person, and others we interviewed. Meeting with the judge helped some accept and feel more at ease with the decisions made or yet to be made. Another young person described how this provided reassurance and marked benefits to their mental well-being and trust in the system:

'I believe it's a really good idea and I support it because knowing how people feel if they did not meet the judge they would be scared for what was going on. I wouldn't understand it. But with having the chance to meet the judge, I feel I'm more reassured, but also I understood more what was going on. It gives you the opportunity to meet someone to realise it was being dealt with, but also gives you reassurance to feel it's all going to go smoothly and it gives you... it takes that worry away from you.... if I didn't get that help and be able to meet the judge, I'd be struggling a lot throughout that time.' (Georgia)

Of the three young people who cited their motivation to engage in the project being to affect the outcome of proceedings, two had completed proceedings. Although they had not achieved the outcome they had wanted, they expressed acceptance of this: 'yeah, I can't go home, but I'll be OK here. I'm safe here.' (Millie) and 'I hoped that I was able to go home again... I just really wanted to go back home but even though I haven't, I am happy where I am' (Alex). It is impossible to disentangle the root cause of this acceptance or to attribute it solely to the impact of the YPPP, but it being a potential benefit is worth further consideration.

### **Understanding of proceedings**

One of the most promising aspects of the YPPP lies in its capacity to enhance young people's comprehension of proceedings. Only one participant directly stated there were no additional benefits in understanding court decision making, having taken part in the YPPP. For most participants, the experience of meeting the judge generally provided clarity and a more nuanced grasp of the decision-making process. Several commented on the judges' ability to demystify complex legal process: 'They explained to us really well what was going on and what the possibilities could be' (Alex); 'she took me step by step basically, it helped me develop an understanding of the way it all works' (Georgia). While some felt that they already had a clear understanding of what happened in court, they still reported additional benefits in terms of well-being. For example, Millie stated that they 'already knew everything' about court processes but later noted that meeting the judge provided an additional benefit: 'I guess I felt more comfortable' (Millie). This link between understanding and well-being was further highlighted by Mia who emphasised that:

'if you see what's going to happen, where it's going to happen, meet who's going to sort it, it helps you ease your worries – to meet that person, to meet the judge... but also helps you understand because they'll be able to explain it to you.' (Mia)

This illustrates the benefits of demystifying the legal process for young people. By reducing uncertainty and fostering a sense of control, the YPPP has the potential to reduce anxiety and promote a greater sense of agency among young people navigating the complexities of the court system.

### **Reassurance about parental treatment**

Although less prominent in the data, the reassurance that parents were being treated fairly throughout the proceedings emerged as an unexpected outcome. This was particularly significant for one young person and indirectly alluded to by two others, with corroborating evidence from their social workers in separate interviews. Some young people expressed a desire to see the location where their parents attended hearings (Millie and Alex) and know what would happen on the day. The lessening of concerns about the impact of the legal process on their parents, and reassurance about the fairness of the decisions made was important to another young person: 'I also know

(the judge) will also reassure my father that everything all well, nothing bad's going to happen to me or my dad,' (Georgia). This suggests the YPPP alleviated not only the young person's anxieties but also indirectly addressed concerns regarding treatment of their parents. This finding highlights the importance of considering the broader impacts on family dynamics and the context within which care proceedings occur.

## Conclusion

It is important to remember that these findings represent a small sample of those who took part in the pilot and the views may not be representative of the wider cohort. Tentatively, they suggest the YPPP has the potential to foster a greater sense of agency, trust and understanding among young people, while also promoting positive relationships with authority figures. They also highlight areas for improvement within the YPPP including the MyPlan process, suggesting either a need to standardise and pay attention to the individual needs of young people, or to reconsider this aspect of the intervention. These findings lend weight to the need to build an understanding of children's court experiences and use the YPPP and similar pilots to better assist young people in encountering court as a containing, empowering and more understandable process.

## Part 2: What did professionals observe about young people's experiences and what were the perceived benefits, if any, of young people participating?

Professional observations largely corroborated findings from young people's interviews. They identified feeling heard, developing trust in judges and gaining understanding of court processes as key benefits. Social workers reported young people feeling 'valued' (Jason) and 'fully included' (Kiera). They observed that direct, unfiltered communication was particularly impactful because through YPPP, young people could have 'face to face, you know, "this is my voice" [discussions with the judge]' (Imogen). However, professionals' external perspectives also revealed other patterns in young people's reactions, behaviours and engagement.

### Experiences

#### Engagement patterns

Professionals observed different levels of participation among children and young people. Some actively participated and wanted detailed explanations about proceedings, whereas others demonstrated more interest in the physical environment of the court and were less focused on substantive discussions about their wishes. These were generally younger participants (10–12 years) who judges described as being motivated primarily by curiosity. The nature of young people's substantive engagement also varied by age. Lucy, a social worker, observed of two siblings that 'the older one came away thinking he had been listened to because the judge had his plan and fed back what was important to him,' while the younger child focused more on logistics. Asking about 'where he would sit and where would mum sit' (Lucy) allowed him to visualise how proceedings would play out in the courtroom.

Social workers observed that some young people, particularly those with additional needs, became visibly restless in the unfamiliar setting of the courtroom and chambers. Tanya observed: 'it's a bit of an alien environment... there was just a lot of hyperactivity from her'. One social worker for a younger child with additional needs said 'he was everywhere, very active... exploring every little aspect of the courtroom' (Yvette) and found the environment overwhelming. She suggested support measures for those with additional needs to make the experience less overstimulating could include using a 'living room suite' first instead of starting in a courtroom or in chambers. Other suggestions included ensuring all participants are at the same eye level, having the judge and others enter gradually rather than the child walking into a room where everyone is formally seated, using a smaller room with fewer distractions, removing formal elements such as microphones and formal seating arrangements, and providing more structure for children while still making them feel like 'the star of the show' (Yvette).

#### Judicial approach

Professionals consistently observed that judges' interpersonal skills significantly influenced young people's experiences and their ability to engage with the process. Judges who shared personal stories and engaged with young people's interests created



genuine connections. Creating an approachable environment was fundamental to this – one judge described this deliberate approach: ‘I never, ever sit on the bench. Always come down... I introduce myself by my first name, say I’m the judge that’s dealing with your case’ (Judge Summers). A social worker commented ‘the judge in this case came out [with] the biggest smile on his face... And he actually sat on the table in front of her after she was like, I can’t believe he sat on the table. And I was like, what did you think? And she was like, I think he’s amazing!’ (Kiera). Another social worker described the judge’s body language as ‘really casual, he sat on the edge of the table, asked about everyday things, made some jokes’ (Mandy), suggesting informal positioning helped bridge the inherent power imbalance. This echoes findings about FDAC, where the judge sitting with parents is seen as an important part of the approach (Harwin et al. 2018; Meindl and Westlake 2024).

Physical presentation also proved crucial in creating an approachable atmosphere. One judge’s informal appearance made a lasting impression as did another wearing a suit with trainers that a social worker noted ‘helped things feel relaxed’ (Yvette). One young person commented to her social worker on a rainbow article of clothing that the judge was wearing: ‘she was like, it was really nice to see that he’s wearing something that’s rainbow coloured and representative of Pride and it meant a lot, and I feel like she felt that she was accepted’ (Kiera). This illustrates how small personal details can profoundly impact young people’s sense of acceptance in the potentially intimidating experience of meeting a judge.

## **Perceived impact**

### **Demystification of court processes leading to improved well-being**

Professionals observed that the YPPP helped young people improve their understanding of court proceedings, which in some cases contributed to improved mental health and well-being. One team manager quoted feedback from a young person who said ‘the curtain has been raised’ for them about what went on in proceedings:

‘Young people are telling us that it allows them to feel part of their court proceedings and allows them to picture what that is, rather than having these worrying mental images. They’re talking about how much more involved they feel and one said that ‘the curtain has been raised,’ which is quite nice.’ (Natalie)

This demystification appeared to have tangible benefits for children’s emotional well-being. For some young people, the impact on mental health and well-being was particularly striking. Kiera described changes in her young person as ‘nothing short of exceptional, [her] mental health has improved significantly’ since the initial hearing. The young person ‘spoke about it for days afterwards’ (Kiera) and shared the experience at school, which suggests the change can be ascribed to the YPPP. This demonstrates the lasting positive impression the experience made, as well as the potential for it to make young people feel valued and reduce the stigma those going through proceedings might experience.

This case was particularly powerful because the young person had previously experienced care proceedings some years earlier. The YPPP provided ‘closure,’ with the young person feeling it ‘answered some unanswered questions from childhood.’ She told her social worker: ‘I feel like I’ve had so many unanswered questions now answered’ and expressed ‘relief.’ Her perception of judges transformed from viewing them as ‘scary people who make decisions whether you like it or not’ to seeing them as

understanding and approachable. Her social worker explained: 'When we unpicked it all and took it all right back, it was clear that those changes, those improvements stemmed from feeling listened to and empowered and understanding it all after all these years' (Kiera).

Social workers also noted children becoming genuinely engaged with the court process once they understood it better. One social worker described how a younger child's understanding developed so much that she 'even offered to illustrate the 'Words and Pictures' life story book for her younger siblings, including drawings of the courtroom and the judge. It showed how much she understood and wanted to help her siblings understand too' (Bethany). Another social worker described meetings helping older children understand the broader system of decision making about their lives and who plays what role: '[they're] really understanding the process more but also understanding that it's not just a decision that social workers make, and I think that's been quite a big thing' (Tanya).

This connection between demystification and well-being suggests that helping young people genuinely understand court processes is not merely an informational exercise, but can have meaningful therapeutic benefits – particularly for those who have experienced previous proceedings without adequate explanation or involvement.

### **Challenging preconceptions about judges**

A striking pattern emerged regarding young people's expectations of judges. Social workers repeatedly observed children expecting judges to be 'in his 90s and just be shouting at everyone' (Tanya) or 'really stern looking' (Kiera). The visible relief when meeting friendly, approachable judges was notable. A social worker observed a judge 'asking [young person] about her favourite bands... he was saying, oh, well, I've been to watch Slipknot and her jaw was on the floor. She couldn't believe it.' (Kiera). Although seemingly minor, challenging preconceptions and dispelling myths about authority figures led some young people to feel more reassured about the court process.

This was particularly significant for young people who were protective of their parents. Tanya described one 12-year-old as 'conscious of and quite protective of mum,' and observed: 'I think that's a really big thing experiencing this friendly character who's going to make decisions and she already worries about mum.' (Tanya). This echoed one of the young people in the previous section describing feeling reassured about her dad's experience of going to court. For children concerned about how their parents would be treated, meeting an approachable judge helped alleviate anxiety about the fairness of proceedings.

### **Small but significant changes**

A team manager observed how 'seemingly very small things from an adult statutory social work legal perspective make a huge difference to young people... simple things like "where's my hamster?"' (Laura). Judges responded with practical interventions including requiring a guitar to be returned within seven days and arranging 'cat contact' (Judge Summers) when a child missed her pets. One judge reflected on the dual purpose of demonstrating responsiveness to children's concerns, noting both the impact on day-to-day quality of life and the potential to show children their concerns matter:

'if they haven't got their X-Box or their musical instrument or they're missing the family dog, [these things are] massively more impactful than I think we realise... and these small things give a bit of hope. But also show that there is reflection



from professionals on what the child is worried about and bothered about.’  
(Judge Summers)

A social worker commented that the YPPP ‘focuses a lot more on actually listening to the child or young person and on simple things like “I want to see my dog”. Proceedings are very procedural [...] They’re taken up by legal speak’ (Lucy). A judge echoed this, explaining how during the course of proceedings, it was easy to overlook the significance of children’s concerns:

‘When we as adults and as judges and professionals sit there, it’s not the most important thing to us. Because we’ve got these big headlines of where are these children going to live and with whom that we’re grappling with. But actually for the young people, it’s those little things that are actually quite important for them as well.’ (Judge Taylor)

By contrast, some professionals were surprised by how reasonable young people’s concerns were. A team manager described his half-joking expectation that young people might make impractical and fantastical requests: ‘we were expecting things like ‘I want to go on holiday to Barbados’... but both of them were really, really grounded. I think one of them just said, “this is where I want to live” and the other one said, “I just want to see my dog”’ (Mark). This speaks both to young people’s ability to engage with maturity and seriousness with the YPPP process, and to prevailing attitudes about young people’s participation and lack of ability to advocate for themselves meaningfully.

### **Cases achieving early resolution**

Some professionals observed the YPPP facilitating swifter outcomes. One social worker attributed a ‘first and final order’ directly to being involved as a YPPP case, explaining the pathway ‘front-loaded’ work that would typically span multiple hearings. She explained:

‘Having the opportunity to speak with the judge to share her views, to demonstrate her understanding, to actually demonstrate this was a plan created with her and by her, really kind of swayed the decision in court on the day because there was no ambiguity around it [...] having those answers directly was massive.’ (Imogen)

She described this early permanence as ‘absolutely massive’ (Imogen) for some young people, given the long, uncertain and anxiety-inducing nature of proceedings. Other social workers echoed the benefit, albeit in a less-tangible manner, of hearing young people’s views in a structured way much earlier in the process than they normally would (Lucy), which gave a concrete reference point for ongoing conversations with both the children and the judge (Tanya).

However, it is important to note that not all professionals observed meaningful benefits. One judge reported minimal impact in most instances, and added that she had seen no changes in outcomes as a result of the pilot. This judge attributed the lack of impact to systemic implementation failures, noting that of seven scheduled meetings, four young people either cancelled or declined to return after one session. Professional views on the acceptability of different components of the YPPP are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

## Conclusion

Professional observations largely corroborated young people's accounts while revealing additional insights about engagement patterns. Judicial approach (encompassing interpersonal skills, physical presentation and informal communication style) proved fundamental to creating an environment where young people felt able to engage. Professionals identified demystification of court processes as having genuine therapeutic value, particularly for young people with previous experience of proceedings, while judges' responsiveness to seemingly 'small' concerns – returning guitars, arranging pet contact – demonstrated tangibly that young people's voices mattered. However, professionals also highlighted important challenges: younger children and those with additional needs sometimes found court environments overwhelming, engagement varied by age and developmental stage, and not all professionals observed meaningful benefits.

# Experiencing the YPPP: How acceptable was the pathway thought to be?

This chapter examines perspectives on the acceptability of the YPPP, focusing on whether professionals and parents believed the pathway should exist in principle, what conceptual tensions emerged and their views on specific programme components.

## Overall acceptability

The YPPP revealed a fundamental divide across professional groups that largely aligned with the burden of additional responsibilities. We discuss two issues here: the acceptability of judges meeting with children in general, and the acceptability of the YPPP as the pathway to facilitate this.

### Judges meeting children

Social workers and team managers remained generally supportive throughout, with all social workers except those from the LA that withdrew indicating they would use it again. Many felt it was relevant to other young people they had worked with in the past. Social workers consistently described it as empowering for children, helping young people feel 'done with' rather than 'done to' (Laura). Several participants also noted that it empowered social workers who were often somewhat removed from the court, giving them a more active role in supporting children by accompanying them to meetings (James). This sustained support from social workers and team managers contrasted with judicial experiences, where initial enthusiasm waned significantly as poor implementation meant judges bore the brunt of administrative failures and role confusion.

Indeed, judges demonstrated the widest spectrum of views, from passionate advocacy to complete disillusionment. One noted they had 'always tried to get older children involved in court proceedings' (Judge Summers) while another highlighted the importance of making sure opportunities for meeting judges were consistent (Judge Taylor). However, the reality of the YPPP meant that in practice some did not support the idea. Two judges described chaotic meetings and challenging behaviour, where conflict between children, parents and the social worker meant the experience was negative for the children, and worrying for the judge. In one court safety procedures were instigated as a result of this, to protect judges who 'felt particularly vulnerable with older young people who were exhibiting quite challenging behaviours.' (Judge Taylor).

One of the participating judges reported being 'disillusioned with it and all of my colleagues are as well' and questioned the value of children meeting judges 'if it's not a

positive benefit to the outcome of the case or to the child.’ (Judge Dawson) Focusing more widely, another reported that in wider discussions held among the judiciary beyond the YPPP areas involved in the intervention: ‘50% of the judges were really excited. And 50% of the judges are horrified’ (Andrea), underlining the polarised views on the value of children meeting judges.

Parents provided valuable perspectives on hypothetical acceptability based on their experience of going through proceedings. All advocated for children meeting judges several times, because the experience of proceedings can be confusing and disorientating. One described an experience outside the YPPP where her children met the judge only once, after the final hearing, where they were told they wouldn’t return home until age 18, creating lasting confusion and mistrust when circumstances later changed. Parents recommended a minimum of three meetings and suggested ages 8–10 years as being an appropriate minimum. Several also felt that meeting with children could help judges see them as individuals and dispel stereotypes about them based on case files. One father said:

‘People in that room [court] talking about my kids, bad mouthing my kids, they’d never ever met my kids. Never even seen the pictures of my kids... how can they talk about my children? When the head of service met my children she was surprised [...] how respectful and polite they were, well dressed...’ (Paul).

Another agreed: ‘I think the judge should have a picture of the children in his head, so he can actually know who he’s ruling upon or she’s ruling upon, [someone that is] not just another number’ (Layla). Most would support meetings that help judges to see children as individuals, particularly in the context of heavy caseloads. However, the impact of judicial impressions being influential in decisions as a result of seeing children in person is a more nuanced and fundamental issue; we discuss this in more detail in the next section.

Notably, parents who took part in the focus group expressed no concerns about their children participating, with Lucy responding to potential worries: ‘No, no – no concerns whatsoever, because at the moment I’ve got to constantly keep answering my children’s questions and they are scared they are going to be taken away again. I wouldn’t have to do that if they were more involved’ (Malia). Although the findings are based on a convenience sample of parents outside the YPPP areas, parental views aligned with professional observations that anticipated parental resistance had largely failed to materialise during the pathway’s delivery. Only one case was reported where parents initially refused consent, concerned the child would ‘tell the judge anything,’ though they eventually agreed (Jessa). Professionals had expected parental opposition to be a significant barrier, but these findings suggest parents may be unexpected advocates for the pathway, viewing it as addressing their children’s confusion and sense of exclusion from life-changing decisions.

Despite differing perspectives on the YPPP itself, there was consensus that the underlying principle – giving children a voice – was valuable. Even the most critical participants acknowledged this merit. The disagreement centred not on whether children should have the opportunity to meet with judges in principle, but on whether implementation problems regarding the YPPP were rectifiable design issues or symptomatic of more fundamental conceptual issues.

## The design of the YPPP

When it came to the design of the pathway, there was consensus from across professional groups that the intensive version – where judges were expected to meet with young people up to six times (or every two to three weeks) during proceedings – was unrealistic. It was seen as unworkable for professionals and potentially undesirable for young people. Some professionals also felt that multiple meetings might be overwhelming, constantly reminding young people they were in proceedings: ‘I don’t want to beat my young person around the head with “we’re in court, remember? Just in case you’ve forgotten, we’re still in court!”’ (Imogen). Several judges noted issues with communicating the frequency of meetings to young people. One explained that 80% of the time children arrived for meetings with incorrect information, believing they’re ‘meeting the judge once a fortnight’ (Judge Dawson), and requiring the judge to correct this misunderstanding.

Some professionals also questioned whether three meetings were necessary. An issue here appeared to be understanding what each meeting was designed to achieve. Two judges and some social workers identified a lack of clarity about the purpose of second and third meetings. A judge questioned what there would be left to discuss in subsequent meetings after the initial introduction but before any decisions had been made, and two social workers expressed similar uncertainty about follow-up meetings. One explained ‘I’m not sure what they would talk about halfway through’ (Lucy) when assessments weren’t yet complete. The other social worker worried another meeting might make children ‘feel a little bit anxious that we were asking them to rethink anything’ when their wishes remained unchanged (Tanya). This was exacerbated for another social worker by the MyPlan, which she felt was poorly designed for follow-up meetings:

‘It worked well the first time, but the second and third times were harder to update. The children felt nothing had changed. The form’s wording isn’t ideal for updates – it’s more suited to the initial meeting’ (Bethany).

Despite these concerns about frequency and purpose, there was broad agreement that some form of structured judicial engagement remained valuable, with professionals emphasising the need for a more flexible, needs-based approach rather than a rigid meeting schedule.

### Need for formal pathway

A key area of disagreement centred on whether a structured pathway was necessary to ensure children were offered the chance to meet with judges. While children could theoretically meet judges already, this rarely happened in practice. One judge articulated the problem: ‘I think it’s important that it’s not, a postcode lottery – if you get [assigned] this judge, you get to meet the judge, if you get that judge, you’re not going to be able to see them’ (Judge Taylor). LA professionals confirmed this gap between theory and practice, with several noting they had not ‘had very many children that have actually physically been to see the judge’ (Fiona) despite judges being ‘very open to those kinds of things’ (Laura).

Views on formalisation divided professionals. Social work professionals argued that because the option existed but wasn’t being used, formalisation was required: ‘Judge Summers is doing this in some cases already without this process, but it isn’t happening consistently’ (Louisa). Another manager noted that awareness varied: ‘for social

workers, particularly newer ones, it feels less known that social workers can speak to judges in that way' (Natalie). They felt the formal pathway could ensure systematic consideration rather than relying on individual knowledge or initiative. Another participant who valued the separate pathway echoed this, noting the 'osmotic effect' where even non-participating cases benefited because panels had to systematically consider all eligible teenagers (James).

However, others – primarily legal professionals and the judiciary – believed existing mechanisms were sufficient if properly used. One legal representative observed that in some areas, guardians already arranged such meetings routinely: 'I'm very used to it just being part of the guardian's role to arrange those meetings with the judge... it's always been good for the children to be involved' (Jessa). She questioned whether 'introducing a new process on top of something that is already happening informally' might paradoxically make things harder. Other legal representatives also expressed conditional support for a pathway but dependent on better integration with existing guardian roles.

Some were particularly opposed to the formal pathway. One judge advocated abandoning the formal YPPP in favour of discussing judicial meetings during initial case management hearings, which would allow for 'more organic, case-specific decisions' about when children might benefit from meeting the judge. He believed this approach already existed and worked when needed meaning the pathway 'does not serve a purpose' (Judge Scott). Ultimately, the LFJB in this area developed a pragmatic solution through introducing mandatory consideration of judicial meetings at initial case management hearings through a checklist, capturing benefits of systematic consideration while avoiding bureaucratic burden.

Despite criticisms of the formal structure of the pathway, professionals identified positive cultural impacts: increased awareness of children meeting judges as an option, empowerment of social workers within court processes and, as one judge noted, becoming 'more focused on children in a family court' (Judge Taylor). These benefits, however, were seen as achievable without the formal structure.

## Core conceptual issues

In this section we discuss three unresolved conceptual tensions that emerged from the pilot: purpose confusion, role confusion and the risk of bias arising from direct contact between children and judges.

### **Purpose: Behaviour change versus voice**

The pathway suffered from fundamental design problems embedded in its core documentation. The MyPlan, intended primarily as a tool for young people to express their views, instead was structured as a quasi-contractual agreement that risked making children responsible for circumstances beyond their control. This created potential for harm including feelings of guilt, responsibility for family outcomes, or perceived failure when circumstances did not change, as well as creating cascading problems throughout implementation.

As noted above, the MyPlan's structure and wording positioned it as a behaviour change instrument rather than a participation tool. According to the *YPPP Handbook*, the initial meeting involves 'a formal signing up to the pathway by the young person and



judge,’ and the MyPlan asked young people to commit to ‘I agree I will...’ statements (YPPP Handbook, p.30). As one legal professional observed, when formatted as a court bundle document, the MyPlan ‘looks like a court order. It looks like this plan is... something that needs to be done.’ (Tori). In practice, this led several young people to put down that they would agree to ‘work with their social worker’ on the MyPlan, but, as Ellie pointed out, ‘ultimately, the court is not about [the social worker]. It’s about where she’s going to live.’ This may be an underlying reason why some judges and legal professionals commented on the poor quality of MyPlans and questioned how meaningfully they were being completed, as well as reflecting young people’s poor recollection of the tool.

Social workers particularly struggled with this contractual framing. Imogen articulated the core confusion:

‘The stuff about the young person agreeing to do certain things, I just didn’t feel that was a good fit for this case, I didn’t know what that was trying to get at. Like, the point of this is to have her views heard not to agree to a contract to behave in a certain way. I didn’t know what the expectation was there or what she was supposed to agree to’ (Imogen).

Team managers echoed the risk of the MyPlan making children feel responsible for outcomes they could not control: ‘If they think at the end “I failed and therefore this has happened,” that’s a real risk’ (Louisa). The document structure implied that children’s circumstances could change through their own actions, which is unrealistic in many cases.

Team managers noticed that frontline practitioners immediately recognised that the MyPlan appeared to target behaviour change rather than participation: ‘When we were launching it, some questions from our teams were ‘surely if you’re going to have a plan for a child, this is applicable to young people where their behaviour is seen as a risk – for deprivation of liberty (DoLs) cases, exploitation, missing from home’ (Natalie). They recognised the fundamental assumption: if you’re asking a child to agree to change certain behaviours, this must be designed for children who have a degree of control over those behaviours. This response reflects a fundamental conceptual problem with the MyPlan – treating children’s behaviours as choices requiring contractual agreements rather than as communications reflecting unmet needs, trauma responses or circumstances beyond their control. It also revealed practitioners’ immediate recognition that the document’s structure assumed a potentially inappropriate level of agency and self-determination in the context of care proceedings.

Team managers described trying to ‘flip that narrative,’ arguing the pathway was ‘more applicable for children in proceedings because of neglect or parental action’ where children ‘have no idea what these proceedings are about, they don’t feel involved at all’ (Louisa). But this repurposing, from therapeutic intervention for adolescents assumed to have a degree of agency to participation mechanism for all children in care proceedings, was never realised in the documentation. The MyPlan retained its behaviour change structure while being applied to children who had neither the developmental capacity nor the actual control over their circumstances to fulfil such a contract.

The MyPlan’s conceptual problems stem in part from basing the YPPP on the Adolescent Project in Coventry and Warwickshire Family Court, then extending it to a broader population. The Coventry pathway was more explicitly designed as a behaviour change intervention for adolescents where the child’s risk-taking behaviour was the

central issue. The decision to then lower the age limit to 10 and expand the scope to all children in care proceedings created fundamental incompatibility: expecting a 10-year-old to demonstrate 'readiness to change' seems inappropriate. Moreover, even older adolescents may be unsuitable for a responsibility-based framework. This risk was particularly acute for exploited young people. As one team manager explained: 'If I say "on your plan, don't go missing" or "don't steal a car," I'm implying they've got a choice, but for some young people being exploited, there isn't a choice – there are powers beyond them pulling them into it' (Louisa). The contractual language fundamentally misunderstood the nature of this harm.

Another social worker's experience illustrated how the MyPlan could cause distress even where exploitation was not an issue, by asking children to take responsibility for impossible outcomes. Her young person wanted to live with her previous foster carer, paraphrasing their rationale as 'because she and her family treat me like their own and I could trust them. I was also happiest there.' When the MyPlan asked 'I think I can be helped to make this happen by...' the child 'didn't want to answer that. She didn't answer it because it can't, and we can't always make that happen. It's really, really sad' (Ellie).

Because of this core tension, it is not surprising that a split among professionals about its core purpose emerged. Most practitioners, predominantly social workers but also judges who met with young people regularly, understood the YPPP primarily as a mechanism for ensuring young people's voices were heard in proceedings. From this majority perspective, the pathway succeeded when children could express their views, regardless of whether those views aligned with professional recommendations or demonstrated therapeutic insight.

Other practitioners, including one judge, viewed the pathway as a behaviour change intervention. This perspective emphasised that meaningful participation required children to demonstrate particular capacities including readiness to change, insight, understanding of their situation, be able to 'take some responsibility for their own actions, or at least acknowledge they have some control over their behaviours' and should 'want to work with professionals, not just come to tell the judge what they want to happen' (Judge Lewis). This judge's expectation was to identify children 'just at that turning point where they can look ahead and can say they don't want to be like this' – children who could benefit from intervention 'to help turn their lives around.' These expectations were consistent with viewing the MyPlan as a behaviour change contract that children would be held accountable for completing, but not with the YPPP's broader participatory aims.



## Professional boundaries and role confusion

### Judicial boundaries

The pathway created uncertainty about professional roles, and judges expressed particular discomfort in relation to this, with one arguing ‘children have social workers for a reason. They have a guardian for a reason... having so many meetings with the judge risks blurring those roles’ (Judge Scott). Indeed, the pilot raised questions about the boundaries of judicial engagement with children. Some of this related to inadequate training (discussed in the implementation chapter) but other aspects were more fundamental. At the heart of this lay two critical questions: how much direct work should judges do with young people, and what is the nature of that work? One judge explained the tension they and others experienced:

‘I felt that I was walking a tightrope of being the independent person that would be making a decision on the evidence. But at the same time, perhaps to make it work, having to almost slide into a bit of a social work role. And I found that quite difficult.’ (Judge Lewis)

This judge went on to describe feeling ‘really, really uncomfortable’ when conversations began to stray into what felt like social work territory: ‘I thought I could manage that [conversation] perfectly well, but it’s not my job.’ (Judge Lewis) This left the judge questioning their role and the impact of this blurring of roles on children. They remarked, ‘if I establish a relationship with the child on some level... and then at the final hearing, I walk into court and I hear the evidence, and then I have to do something completely different to what they may have asked me to do.’

Professional comfort levels with this more engaged role varied significantly based on prior experience and judicial philosophy. As one participant noted: ‘some judges were not too keen to do it, and felt uncomfortable and didn’t feel skilled enough to speak to young people, believe it or not’ (Andrea). Judges with FDAC experience appeared more comfortable with direct child engagement, having already adapted to a more relational, problem-solving judicial role within that specialist context.

One participant hypothesised that there was a divide in how judges viewed their position within the family justice system and whether they saw themselves as inside or outside the ‘ecosystem’ of child welfare: ‘The family court makes decisions about children in the most important possible elements of their lives, but doesn’t see itself as part of an ecosystem that journeys with a child’ (Andrea). However, the pilot’s success arguably depended on judges being willing to engage with children in ways that built trust, knowing they might ultimately make decisions contrary to children’s wishes. This fundamental tension between judicial independence and meaningful engagement remained unresolved, with judges managing it differently based on their personal comfort with role flexibility and their interpretation of judicial boundaries.

### Cafcass guardians

The YPPP created fundamental tensions around professional roles and boundaries, particularly regarding Cafcass guardians whose lack of involvement was described as ‘jarring’ (James) and ‘confusing and incoherent’ (Tori) given their statutory responsibility for representing children’s wishes and feelings to the court. At the heart of this was a fundamental concern about role encroachment. As one social worker explained, ‘Cafcass were quite sceptical about the YPPP because they feel this is mainly their role – to facilitate the child’s voice within care proceedings’ (Tori). This seemed to be fuelled

by 'duplication anxiety,' (Natalie): it 'felt as though it was blurring the role of the children's guardian' (Jessa).

This scepticism reflected deeper concerns about professional boundaries and the legitimacy of creating alternative channels for children's voice. Traditionally, the guardian's role has been to ascertain and present the child's wishes and feelings to the court. The pilot's attempt to create a direct channel between children and judges was perceived by some as potentially undermining or duplicating this statutory function.

The inconsistent involvement of guardians – formally excluded nationally yet sometimes present locally – also sometimes created situations where professional boundaries became blurred and contested. In some cases, guardians were not aware that children on their caseload had participated. In other, judges, uncomfortable with guardian absence, found ways to include them despite restrictions and the resulting professional dynamic exposed tensions about who holds authority and expertise regarding children's wishes and feelings. As one solicitor noted: 'I know some solicitor colleagues have said, well, what's the role of the solicitor here? Because I would usually attend any meeting with the judge... You've got the representatives of the child not being part of that meeting.' (James) This created what another participant described as 'an unusual configuration within the court' (Polly) where social workers attended without their legal representation while the child attended without the guardian, inverting traditional professional arrangements.

But these tensions were compounded by the practical realities of Cafcass capacity. As one participant noted, guardians now have 'fewer visits with children than they used to which means they might miss things that are important to the child. It's not the Rolls Royce service it used to be' (Laura) due to capacity constraints. This participant saw the YPPP as having the potential to address this gap, giving children 'the opportunity to highlight in their plan what's important to them, what they want to get across' (Laura). The result was a confused professional landscape where guardians were absent from formal participation yet practically engaged with the process in some cases, where their traditional role as the child's voice was both preserved and challenged, and where the boundaries of professional expertise and authority remained unclear and contested.

## **Risk of 'bias' from direct contact**

The pathway created complex and sometimes contradictory concerns about bias arising from judges meeting children in person. Professionals disagreed about whether direct observation would lead to more or less accurate judicial assessments – and in some cases, actively hoped to influence judicial decisions through these meetings.

One judge articulated the core problem through a concrete example. He described meeting a 10-year-old 'described as feral' in court documents, who appeared in person as 'really sweet... talkative... quite confident'. Furthermore, 'she was clean [and wearing] school uniform.' (Judge Summers). This disconnect created potential for bias in multiple directions. The judge warned that judges must 'ensure that you don't end up with some sort of bias where things aren't as bad as they seem on paper just from the appearance of a child.' He noted that 'some kids are really likeable' and 'want to be with their parents irrespective of what's going on,' requiring conscious effort not to let positive impressions override evidence of serious concerns. While he found it 'quite cathartic' to meet 'really polite, calm children who are presented very differently on paper,' he remained aware that sympathetic presentations should not override

documented evidence. Equally, he recognised a child's challenging presentation might reinforce negative assumptions unfairly.

Different stakeholders actively wanted judges to be influenced by direct observation, but in opposing directions. One social worker advocated for judicial visits to ensure judges witnessed neglectful conditions first-hand. One argued this would 'give the judge an insight into the reality of the children's lives – where they're living, the environment, the culture' (Mandy). Her explicit hope was that direct observation of deprivation would influence decisions in ways that clean, well-presented children in court settings might not. Parents sought the opposite effect. They believed direct contact would correct rather than create bias by showing judges that their children were being misrepresented in professional reports. One parent described how the head of service was surprised when meeting his children to find them 'respectful and polite... well dressed' (Paul).

The pathway thus introduced bidirectional risks: that judges might be inappropriately swayed either by articulate, well-presented children whose demeanour belied serious concerns, or by challenging behaviour that confirmed negative professional narratives. The competing intentions to influence judicial perceptions through direct observation represented an unresolved challenge.

# Implementing the YPPP: How was the pathway set up, delivered and operationalised?

## Who took part?

### Local authorities

The pilot originally expected 10 LAs to participate across two LFJBs. However, significant attrition occurred: two withdrew early due to capacity constraints and competing priorities, including one having recently had a negative Ofsted inspection; two had minimal contact with the programme team; one withdrew; and another maintained they were considering cases but invited no young people to take part during the evaluation. Four LAs – two from each LFJB – implemented the intervention, facilitating at least one meeting between a young person and a judge. Table 2 summarises implementation status across all participating sites.

Table 2: Local authority implementation status

Implementation status	Number of LAs
Successfully implemented (LA1–LA4)	4
Early withdrawal	2
Minimal or no contact	2
Post-launch withdrawal	1
No young people offered participation	1

### Young people

Between 30 and 50 young people were expected to participate. In practice, 24 young people across 19 cases (from 19 families) met with a judge at least once between launch and July 2025. Table 3 shows participation by LA and the proportion entering the YPPP from eligible cases. Although only four LAs ‘properly’ implemented the YPPP, some data for LA 5 – which had no YPPP cases, and LA 6 – which withdrew after one, was provided and is included here. Among LAs that implemented the programme and provided eligibility data, the average proportion of eligible young people who

participated was 26%. LA5, which had zero YPPP cases and no data on eligible cases, is not included in this calculation.

**Table 3: Throughput to end of July 2025**

LA	Eligible cases	YPPP cases	YPPP cases as a proportion of eligible cases	Children who met judge at least once
1	Missing	4	NA	4
2	27	7	26%	10
3	16	4	25%	5
4	11	3	27%	4
5	13	0	0%	0
6	Missing	1	NA	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>24</b>

## What factors affected uptake and reach?

### Limited eligible population

The pool of eligible cases proved smaller than anticipated. Staff in both LFJB areas consistently reported fewer older children entering proceedings, with one legal representative noting having only four teenagers on a caseload of over 30 children. More significantly, proceedings involving older teenagers often fell into excluded categories. DoLs cases, which frequently involve older adolescents, were excluded from the YPPP, substantially reducing the eligible population. One participant reflected on this shift: ‘There was a time I think three or four years ago... there were section 31 [DoL] judges sitting very regularly up here, hearing teenager cases. And obviously, once the national DoLs list opens up, they head over to London’ (James).

### Local authority ‘wariness’

Some LAs applied varied and sometimes extensive exclusion criteria beyond the formal pilot requirements. The cumulative effect of these considerations meant very few young people were deemed appropriate. Some professionals articulated concerns about whether the pathway was suitable for certain vulnerable young people, with considerations about emotional capacity or maturity and family dynamics influencing decision making. The following quote illustrated the restrictive effect of these criteria:

‘There’s one we feel could have been suitable, but because of the vulnerability of the child and where the young person is, and where one parent is, and the hostility, we feel that the level of conflict may be such that the power imbalance will be so significant that it just simply will not be appropriate to go down this route.’ (Fiona)

However, such criteria – vulnerability, parental hostility, maturity, power imbalances – are features of virtually all care proceedings, raising questions about whether these

exclusions effectively ruled out the vast majority of eligible children. One LA had been ‘considering’ cases since August 2024 but offered the pathway to no young people by the end of the evaluation period.

Additionally, some LAs adopted a cautious ‘wait-and-see’ approach. One participant referred to ‘wariness’ on the part of some LAs, who wanted to observe how the pathway worked in other authorities before committing cases themselves (James). This hesitancy further limited uptake during the evaluation period.

### **The narrow window for meaningful engagement**

While there was no evidence that judicial capacity directly prevented participation, it did create scheduling pressures because courts needed to know whether to allocate cases to a YPPP judge. This made recruiting young people to the pilot challenging. One team manager explained: ‘This gives us quite a small window when there’s also a lot of heat in the conversation with the family – you’re going in saying ‘we’re issuing care proceedings, going to court. Would you like to be part of this pilot?’ It’s quite tricky.’ (Louisa). Legal professionals noted several other logistical hurdles including timing misalignments, such as where proceedings were sometimes issued before YPPP participation was confirmed.

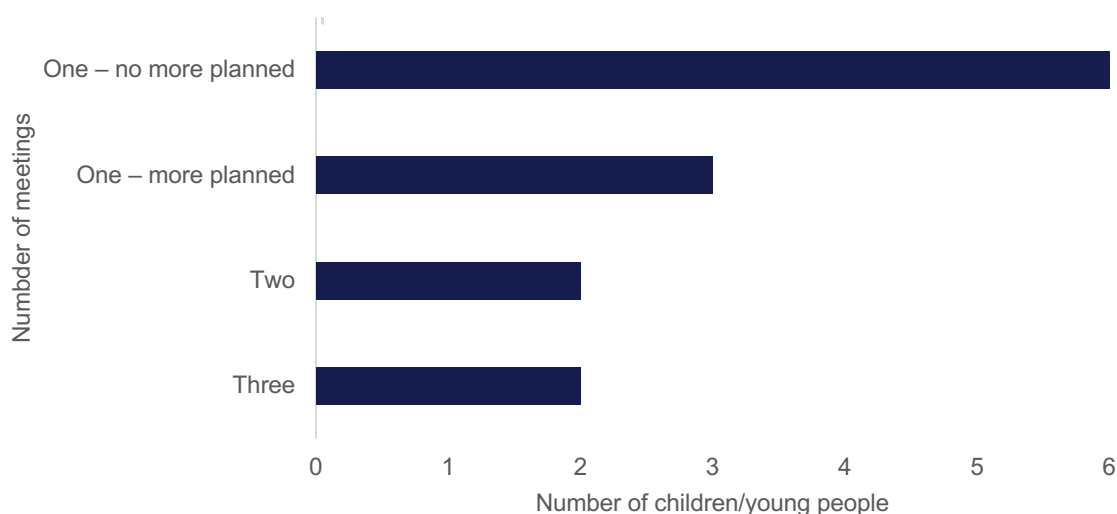
### **Lack of awareness and information sharing**

A final barrier to uptake was the lack of awareness about the YPPP among professionals. One team manager described the pathway not being ‘front of mind’ for social workers (Mark), suggesting it had failed to become embedded in routine practice. Competing organisational priorities further diluted attention – another team manager described how their LA was simultaneously running concurrent pilots while undergoing an Ofsted inspection (Louisa). The result of this was information about the YPPP failing to reach key professionals. Several practitioners, including legal representatives and social workers, reported only hearing about the pilot accidentally. One solicitor noted: ‘No information has ever been shared by our LAs... I found out about it by accident’ (Elizabeth). This lack of systematic information sharing meant that professionals who could have identified suitable cases and advocated for young people’s participation were potentially unaware the YPPP existed.

## **How did young people take part?**

We cross-referenced the LA throughput data outlined above with qualitative interview data from professionals and young people to understand *how* these young people had engaged with the YPPP. We have interview data relating to 13 of the 24 young people who met with a judge at least once. Figure 2 shows engagement patterns to the end of July 2025.

**Figure 2: Number of young people and meetings attended (n=13)**



As noted above, nearly half (46%) attended only one meeting and indicated (either to the research team in an interview, or to their social worker who took part in an interview) that they did not plan follow-up sessions. Just under a third (31%) attended multiple meetings, while the remainder attended one meeting and intended to continue. This is designed only to give an indication, because it includes only just over half of the young people who took part in meeting with the judge. However, this pattern was corroborated by qualitative findings from judges and other professionals.

### **Why did children tend to only meet the judge once?**

The reasons most children only met with the judge once were both procedural and substantive. Because implementation had been delayed, and despite the evaluation being extended, some cases were still early in the process and further meetings were planned. In other cases, single meetings resulted from case progression and resolution. Where proceedings concluded relatively quickly, there was no opportunity to fit in two subsequent meetings even when the initial meeting had been positive. Most proceedings entering the YPPP had not concluded by the end of the evaluation.

Beyond procedural factors, some young people chose not to continue due to negative experiences with the meeting, misunderstandings about their participation or because a single meeting had achieved its purpose.

### **Negative experiences with the meeting**

In one case, a social worker reported that a young person disengaged and did not want to attend further meetings because the judge 'asked too many questions'. However, the social worker did question whether the young person, who was 10 years old with additional needs, was too young for the pathway or whether, with sufficient adaptations for neurodivergent children, he might have been able to engage more meaningfully with the opportunity.



In another example, lack of preparation and miscommunication about a case included in the pathway very early on meant the judge and court had not been properly informed or prepared for their attendance. Without adequate preparation and coordination, the experience became disorienting rather than empowering and the LA subsequently withdrew from the pilot. In another the judge described a 'disastrous' case where poor planning and the unexpected arrival of family members hostile to social services meant the children were 'actually quite traumatised by the experience.' (Judge Lewis). These negative experiences were the exception not the rule, but they highlight the potential for harm when cases are poorly selected or where children and professionals are inadequately prepared.

### **(Mis)understanding the purpose of participation and the limits of influence**

There was evidence that some young people disengaged for different reasons related to misunderstandings about their role and influence in the process. Some older teenagers disengaged when they realised they could not directly influence court decisions or when they disagreed with professional recommendations. As with initial motivations for participation, these reasons for disengagement reflect the complexity of young people's engagement with the YPPP. One social worker explained: 'I was surprised she didn't want to attend the second meeting. I don't think this had anything to do with [the judge] or the process... she was frustrated I did not recommend for her to return to mum's care' (Mara). A judge commented on the pattern more broadly: 'Some children get a lot out of it. I think an equally large amount of them just wonder what the point is when they realise they're not going to be able to persuade the judge to do what they want to do' (Judge Scott). In these cases, young people appeared to have expected their participation to result in specific outcomes aligned with their wishes and disengaged upon discovering the limits of their influence.

Conversely, some young people feared being held responsible for decisions, particularly when this might damage family relationships. According to her social worker, the young person felt 'really in the middle between mum and dad' and told her: 'I don't want to tell the judge how I feel, because then they'll do that and then I'm picking a side' (Lillian). This suggests confusion about the judge's role and concerns about bearing the weight of decision making that might be particularly difficult for young people to reconcile. These contrasting patterns (some young people wanting more influence while others feared having too much) highlight the need for clearer, individualised communication about the purpose of meetings, realistic expectations about how views will inform (rather than determine) decisions, and careful distinction between being heard and being responsible for outcomes.

Some professionals also raised concerns about the potential harm that might arise from young people believing their participation influenced the judge's decision, only to experience the outcome going against their wishes. One judge voiced concerns about 'setting children up to fail' when they might ultimately make decisions contrary to children's wishes:

'Lots of these cases are all around children feeling that they're not listened to. Nobody understands them. They're done to. And then they get this opportunity to go see a judge who's going to make a decision about their lives, and then they tell them how they feel. And then the judge nods and says 'you seem like a really nice person.' And then at the end of the case does completely the opposite. And you know they must... How can they not think, 'Well, what was the point of that? Nobody listens to me.' I just think you're almost setting them up to fail.' (Judge Lewis)

However, among the young people interviewed for this evaluation, there was no evidence that participation led to feelings of trauma or increased distress when outcomes did not align with their preferences. Young people demonstrated realistic expectations about the judge's role and the limits of their influence, with several explicitly stating they understood the judge would make the decision they believed was right rather than simply granting the young person's wishes. This suggests that with appropriate preparation and management of expectations, the risk of harm can be substantially mitigated, though not entirely eliminated.

### **Single meetings were sometimes sufficient**

For some young people, one meeting was sufficient either because they felt heard after meeting the judge only once or because their curiosity about the court process had been satisfied. One legal representative observed: 'We've had a couple where once they've had that initial meeting, that solidified they're being listened to' (Jessa) and young people did not feel the need to return. A judge explained the role of curiosity:

'Some of them are just curious about what a judge looks like, what a court looks like. They say, 'Well, I thought you'd have a hammer. So, they've got ideas in their head about what courts are like. So, it has the benefit of showing them what judges are like, what courtrooms are like. But once you've done that, you can do that with one meeting, and I've had the impression once the curiosity has been satisfied, they don't see the need to come back.' (Judge Scott)

The idea that young people were curious and that this interest was often satisfied by a single meeting was put forward by several judges.

## **Who is the YPPP thought to be appropriate for?**

The issues with reach raise questions about which young people were invited to take part in the YPPP. While eligibility criteria were theoretically broad, practice revealed that a much narrower range of children were considered appropriate. Beyond the formal exclusions (DoLs and secure accommodation cases where risk management took priority), interview findings revealed more nuanced decision making about suitability.

### **Views on age range**

The age range was generally considered appropriate by practitioners, though it evolved during the pilot. There were regional differences, with one LFJB engaging younger children in practice, while the other maintained a preference for children aged 12 and over. Several practitioners identified the 10–12 age range as a particular 'sweet spot' (Tori) with these younger adolescents seen as benefiting significantly from having their voices heard directly, particularly because they cannot 'vote with their feet' in the way that older teenagers might (Polly).

### **Assessment and selection process**

LA professionals emphasised that decisions about offering the YPPP were based on multiple factors including needs, maturity and individual capability rather than age alone. As one team manager observed: 'Age is one of the most influential factors really and then the social worker's description of how engaging, how confident the children

are within the family' (Tina). Social workers and team managers emphasised that this was carefully considered, with social workers drawing on their relationship with and understanding of family dynamics and young people's needs. One participant (not from an LA) commented that the LAs in their area had 'done a really good job of correctly identifying the right children that could really benefit from the project' (Patricia).

However, a tension emerged between LA and judicial perspectives on this process. While LAs described applying sometimes stringent criteria and giving careful consideration to referrals, some judges felt insufficient thought had been given to who could benefit. This resulted in inappropriate referrals being made seemingly only on age. A judge observed:

'It feels to us that LAs get cases where the children are within the relevant bracket, and it feels as if they just therefore as a knee jerk reaction, put them forward without any consideration as to whether they would be suitable candidates or not, or children who would be interested in meeting a judge or not.' (Judge Dawson)

Another judge described young people taking part who 'just came to tell me they wanted to go home' and lacked motivation to work with professionals, including one example where 'after seeing the court and expressing her wishes, she didn't want any follow-up meetings' (Judge Lewis). These observations raise important questions about how 'interest' and 'suitability' should be defined and by whom.

Judges appeared to equate suitability with young people demonstrating insight into their situations and motivation to engage with professional recommendations, while some young people's 'interest' was in having their opposing views heard by the decision maker. This suggests differing understandings of the pathway's purpose: whether it exists primarily for young people who are already aligned with professional plans and willing to 'work with' the system, or whether it should be available to all young people as a participation right, regardless of whether their views align with professional assessments or their level of engagement with services. It also points to the core conceptual issue at stake in the YPPP discussed in the previous chapter: whether it is primarily a way of young people having a voice in proceedings or a mechanism for holding young people to account and encouraging them to make positive changes in their lives.

## Suitability

Professionals consistently identified certain characteristics suggesting a child might benefit from the pathway. These included children who were articulate and confident, and who actively sought to voice their opinions. One team manager described two participating young people as: 'Quite an anomaly in the sense that they were very, very confident. Both of them were like, "can't wait, just get me in there." Not fazed at all. Not one single bit.' (Mark). This description inadvertently highlights how the YPPP may have been targeted at children who were already relatively empowered and confident, rather than necessarily reaching those who might most benefit from support to have their voices heard.

The pathway was also thought to be particularly useful for children experiencing high anxiety about proceedings. One social worker noted her young person 'would go mad if she thought I'd planned a meeting without involving her' (Kiera) and felt being involved could help allay these worries. Findings from interviews with young people supported the idea that being involved in the YPPP could reduce anxiety about proceedings.

Anecdotally, the pathway was also used often for oldest siblings in large family groups, where their voice might carry particular weight. It was also considered suitable for young people who clearly opposed returning home and disagreed with their parents' positions.

Conversely, individual factors led to exclusion. Young people with significant mental health challenges requiring specialist placement were deemed inappropriate, as were those in high-conflict cases with significant hostility creating 'irreconcilable positions' between parents and children (Fiona). Cases where parents denied children's allegations, potentially creating situations where participation could cause harm, tended to be excluded.

## How feasible is implementing the YPPP?

This section examines three types of feasibility: organisational, technical and resource-related feasibility. For each we discuss barriers to and enablers of successful implementation.

### Organisational feasibility

Organisational feasibility refers to whether an intervention can be successfully integrated within existing organisational structures, systems and cultures. This includes coordination between agencies, institutional readiness, leadership and information-sharing mechanisms.

#### Barriers

##### Poor inter-agency coordination

Information sharing and coordination between courts and LAs caused problems. This related primarily to the sharing of the MyPlan. One judge noted 'I think three quarters of them, I had to chase the LA for the documents [...] it's really frustrating' (Judge Dawson). Another noted that 'at least half a dozen meetings have gone by because of a failure to provide the documents' (Judge Scott). In some early cases there was confusion among LA staff about the need for documents to be shared in advance, but lack of coordination appeared to persist throughout the pilot.

Information-sharing mechanisms between the courts and LAs also caused some issues in terms of evaluation and monitoring because there was no single shared system for tracking YPPP cases, and some coordination activity depended on individuals emailing judges or court clerks (or both) to notify them of cases. These coordination failures appeared to reflect deeper differences between judicial and social work practice. What judges perceived as frustrating disorganisation – delayed documents, cancellations and last-minute changes – was viewed as relatively 'run-of-the-mill' unpredictability for social workers dealing with vulnerable adolescents. Social workers generally felt the pilot was well organised within their usual practice context, highlighting a fundamental disconnect in professional expectations and tolerance for disorder.

##### Lack of Cafcass involvement

The decision by Cafcass not to participate formally created complications and was thought to be a 'major limitation' (Andrea) and 'a real sticking point' (James) by some involved in the pilot. Conceptual issues related to this were discussed in the previous chapter, but this also created practical issues. Some judges were uncomfortable with

the non-involvement of Cafcass and tried various ways to address it, including court directions and changing meeting protocols. This resulted in Cafcass guardians in one region being involved in meetings. However, because of their lack of formal involvement, guardians were not systematically informed when children participated, creating communication breakdowns between LAs, courts and Cafcass. One participant felt it would have been helpful for guardians to have access to the MyPlan documents to better understand the child's views and cross-reference what they had shared previously: 'it helps assess consistency, confusion or influence from others, which is crucial for accurate analysis' (Patricia), as well as having updates on which children had participated.

### Champion dependency

The pilot's success proved heavily dependent on individual champions, in both LA and court settings, rather than systemic support, creating a fundamentally fragile implementation model. In some cases, strong judicial commitment from individual judges drove implementation despite system barriers. As one legal representative explained: 'our judge here is the sole judge handling YPPP cases, fitting these into his free time and lunch breaks due to his personal commitment to the project' (Polly). While manageable at a small scale, this arrangement would be unsustainable if numbers grew. This champion dependency created fragility and when influential individuals left positions, implementation stalled. One participant noted: 'We ended up losing named people. You didn't know who was responsible... I think we've only had one local authority that's been really consistent in doing it in a way that it should have been implemented' (Andrea). The reliance on dedicated champions, so crucial for set up, became a critical barrier to longer-term scaling, sustainability and feasibility.

### Enablers

#### Presenting the YPPP as existing good practice: The 'business-as-usual' approach

Successful implementation in LAs depended on leadership from team managers that strategically framed YPPP as integration of existing practice rather than additional burden. One manager described how the YPPP was 'sold' to social workers being important, 'it really is just sometimes it's hearts and minds and how you deliver information in a particular way' (Mark). His approach was to emphasise this as existing good practice, rather than a departure or innovation: 'How I sold it to my team – because if they think there's something different, or something's going to be added to their already very busy lives – I sell it and say, "Look, all you are doing is direct work. It's a direct work session"' (Mark). This approach minimised perceived disruption and emphasised continuity over change: 'It's literally just a small one-page addition to what they would already normally do' (Mark).

Other LA staff also commented on the degree to which the YPPP represented existing good practice that had sometimes been sidelined by other pressing concerns and high workload. This resonated differently across the workforce depending on experience. More experienced practitioners recognised YPPP as formalising established good practice: 'From team leaders and senior leaders – more experienced practitioners – a lot of feedback was 'this is just good practice. I remember when I used to do this.' (Louisa) Whereas for less experienced staff, the YPPP appeared more innovative: 'newer qualified staff say, "this is a great idea, I didn't know this could be done"' (Natalie).



### Willingness to experiment and learn by doing

The contrast between implementing and non-implementing areas revealed a critical cultural factor: willingness to adopt a ‘try-it-and-see’ approach. There was a sense in two of the LAs that ‘overthinking it’ (Mark) resulted in paralysis at the start of the pilot and needed to be overcome. One participant reflected: ‘It felt like we were going round in circles for a while, and my sense was we were overthinking it and should just get on with it and see how it goes, which is where we’ve landed’ (Louisa). Another explained that they mapped out the process for their team: ‘I just developed a process map... Nothing overly complicated. It was literally “this is what we do anyway and it’s a small minor addition to that”’ (Mark).

LAs that were willing to experiment and were pragmatic managed to implement successfully, while those that remained cautious and sought certainty about the process before starting failed. Some staff described their LAs as ‘hovering’ (Fiona) and ‘waiting to see the evidence’ (Laura) from other LAs before starting. An appetite for learning-by-doing emerged as a fundamental prerequisite for implementation, distinguishing areas that could adapt and refine their approach from those halted by the need for complete clarity before beginning. This pattern reflects broader differences in organisational culture and leadership. LAs with senior leaders who were willing to champion the pathway, frame implementation as an opportunity for learning rather than a risk, and empower frontline staff to problem-solve were able to move forward despite uncertainties. Conversely, LAs with more risk-averse cultures, where new initiatives required extensive evidence and guarantees before being attempted, struggled to engage with a pilot explicitly designed to test, refine and learn from emerging practice.

### Structural integration within LAs

Although not well integrated with court processes and systems, internally LAs that were able to implement the pathway developed integrated systems involving legal teams. One participant noted the importance of involving the legal team in set up because of their role ‘both as a backstop to stop children falling through without being offered the opportunity, and to get them on board’ (Natalie). Systematic coordination with legal teams created mechanisms where these teams automatically asked social workers about eligibility when receiving alerts about teenagers. The successful integration of the YPPP into care planning panels and legal gateway meetings showed that the pathway could work when built into existing decision-making structures rather than needing parallel systems to be developed.

## Resource feasibility

Resource feasibility refers to whether the financial, human and material resources needed to implement and sustain an intervention are available. This includes funding, staffing capacity and physical infrastructure required for delivery.

### Barriers

#### No dedicated funding

The pilot operated as what one judge termed an ‘initiative without funding’ (Judge Scott), creating resource challenges. With no dedicated budget, implementation relied on goodwill from already overstretched teams, and this proved to be ‘a hard sell when you’re trying to influence national practice but can’t offer any incentive’ (Louisa). The absence of dedicated funding created hidden costs that accumulated throughout implementation: ‘it needed a dedicated coordinator not directly involved in the case’

(Mandy). Administrative burdens fell disproportionately on judges and court staff, who found themselves chasing missing documents and managing logistics without additional time allocation.

While legal teams and judges bore significant administrative burdens, social workers – who were expected to shoulder the greatest workload increase – reported the impact as less substantial than feared. The resource challenge was thus characterised not by excessive demands on frontline practitioners, but by lack of administrative infrastructure and misalignment between where resources were needed (coordination, documentation, judicial time) and where the work actually fell (on already overstretched court systems without dedicated support).

### Judicial capacity

Capacity issues for judges were exacerbated by the administrative pressures described above. But whereas one LFJB had a team of judges engaged in the YPPP, the other relied on a single judge who accommodated YPPP cases alongside their regular caseload. This created scheduling pressures and bottlenecks according to LA staff. While this arrangement proved manageable at the pilot's small scale, it was widely acknowledged as unsustainable if numbers were to grow: 'only certain judges can do it currently. If everyone was doing it, it wouldn't be as pressurised' (Louisa).

## Enablers

### Relatively minimal additional workload for LAs

Although the YPPP introduced additional demands within the court system, its impact on LA workloads was significantly less than professionals had initially anticipated. For legal teams, the extra work was minimal. While judges and legal representatives frequently expressed concern about the potential burden on social workers, accounts from social workers and team managers themselves did not support these fears. Team managers described the added responsibilities as 'time neutral' (Natalie) and 'manageable' (Mark), framing them as an 'add-on' to existing practice rather than a substantial shift in how social work was conducted. Where additional effort was required, social workers often stressed that it was worthwhile. As one explained: 'If someone had said to me, "You need to work three extra hours this week so that [young person] gets a voice," I'd do that – it's absolutely worth that time' (Ellie). Another reflected: 'I'd do the work tenfold if it meant we could do that for all young people' (Kiera).

### Embedded support roles

Dedicated support roles emerged as enablers, with one team in an LA offering to accompany social workers to explain the YPPP to eligible families. Other LA teams held monthly check-ins with judges and legal teams to maintain momentum. It is also worth noting that court clerks, largely invisible in the YPPP model as originally set out, played a key role not only in supporting judges with the administrative issues outlined above, but also in setting up meetings and supporting on the day when young people came to court. Social workers commented on the clerks' flexibility and responsiveness in scheduling meetings, as well as the supportive role they played welcoming young people and making them feel comfortable. Where court clerks were prepared, proactive and supportive they seemed to play a key role in implementation.



## Technical feasibility

Technical feasibility refers to whether practitioners possessed the necessary skills, knowledge, tools and procedures to deliver the YPPP effectively. This includes adequate training, clear role definitions, appropriate documentation and technical competence.

### Barriers

#### Inadequate training

Training emerged as a significant implementation challenge, with judges reporting that preparation did not address their specific needs. One judge critiqued the training for focusing on irrelevant techniques: 'I can't imagine that a judge is going to start messing about with a balloon with a young kid, because that wouldn't be appropriate when you're meeting the judge' (Judge Dawson). Others described it as 'very brief' (Judge Scott), primarily 'procedural' (Judge Lewis), or 'fairly straightforward' but 'wasn't lightbulb-type training' (Judge Taylor).

The most prominent training gap identified was 'an understanding [of] what is envisaged by those who set up the project to be the role of the judge' (Judge Dawson). This included guidance on maintaining judicial independence while engaging directly with children, managing professional role boundaries and handling challenging scenarios – issues that relate to fundamental questions about whether judges should play a hands-on role in working with young people directly (discussed in the 'acceptability' section and hence not repeated here). The training's focus on generic child development and communication techniques did not address these judicial-specific concerns.

A particular area where judges lacked understanding and confidence was in managing unexpected things that children said during meetings. One judge described an example:

'I said to the child, 'So do you want to say anything to me about how you feel about seeing your dad?' And she started telling me her views, and then she got really upset. And then she came out with an allegation... that her social worker hadn't heard about. And that was really difficult because that's exactly what the meeting shouldn't be and puts me in a difficult position of hearing this for the first time. And maybe no training could stop that happening [...] I don't think I asked an inappropriate question, but I just feel like I'm kind of making it up as I go along. [...] I feel like I'm just ad-libbing, basically. And that's where I would welcome assistance.' (Judge Dawson)

This incident exposed a fundamental tension in the judicial role: judges needed to create a safe space for young people to express themselves while avoiding hearing new evidence that could compromise their judicial independence or procedural fairness. From a child protection standpoint, if a child feels safe enough to disclose abuse or harm, this is arguably a positive outcome – it means important information has come to light that can help keep the child safe. However, from a legal perspective it creates complications – the judge has heard evidence outside the formal process, without other parties having the opportunity to respond. The lack of training on how to navigate this tension, or what to do when disclosures occur, left judges feeling they were 'ad-libbing' in situations that required clear protocols.

## MyPlan

The section on acceptability examined substantive issues with the MyPlan; this section covers technical problems with format, accessibility and language. The primary criticism was its lack of child-friendly design:

‘It’s in tiny font. I think Times New Roman, not the best font. It’s not set out well, not even formatted properly. It’s in the most unhelpful form I could imagine for a child – the pro forma just isn’t fit for purpose. If I looked at that document, it’s not accessible to me, let alone a child.’ (Judge Dawson)

Social workers echoed these concerns, calling it ‘drab’ with ‘tiny boxes’ where young people were expected to write life-determining decisions, noting it was ‘very formal and not that child friendly’ (Imogen). They wanted to use more creative, visual approaches like drawings and colourful formats suited to using with children but were uncertain whether courts would accept adapted versions.

The rigid format was likened to ‘trying to put round pegs in square holes,’ offering no space for creativity or different communication styles (Imogen). A solicitor described the ‘oxymoron’ (Tori) of such an adult document capturing children’s voices. While usable for confident, articulate children, it failed children of different ages and abilities: ‘where’s the space for children who want to do it but struggle that little bit?’ (Ellie). The language was also criticised for inappropriate reading levels: ‘if you look at the reading age of the form and then the child we’re working with and how to interpret that to the child, it doesn’t always match’ (Mandy).

The structure created further problems. It opened with traumatic content – asking children to outline professional worries. One professional explained:

‘It starts with ‘the social workers are concerned about me because:’ and then it says, ‘areas of concern e.g. not attending school, parents’ drug/alcohol use, mixing with the wrong people’...that’s a bit harsh, isn’t it?’ (Imogen)

These design failures showed in responses: one judge reported a young person who ‘just signed something. She never read it... just signed it without knowing what it was’ (Judge Dawson), while some social workers abandoned the template entirely – ‘I took another piece of paper because I didn’t like the format’ (Ellie) – demonstrating that even when practitioners could recognise and respond to children’s needs, the tools provided undermined effective delivery. Involving young people in the co-design of programme tools early on in development might have avoided some of these technical and accessibility-related issues.

## Enablers

### Judges’ skills in working with young people

The judges who participated generally possessed strong interpersonal skills for communicating with young people and did not express lack of confidence in their ability to engage with children in one-to-one settings. Several judges brought particularly relevant prior experience and some regularly met with children in care proceedings before the pilot began. For judges with FDAC experience, trauma-informed training in motivational interviewing and trauma-based therapy provided a valuable foundation that transferred effectively to the YPPP. This suggests the training gap was not about judges’ communication skills but rather about understanding their specific role within the pathway, managing unexpected situations like disclosures or unsafe behaviour, and navigating the tension between judicial independence and direct engagement.

### Flexibility and confidence to innovate

The pathway demonstrated adaptability when practitioners were willing to be flexible and exercise professional judgement. Judges showed flexibility in adjusting meeting frequency to individual circumstances, for example one judge reduced the planned three meetings to one final meeting when a vulnerable young person missed her appointment, recognising this was ‘more appropriate given [her] circumstances and the accelerated court timeline’ (Ellie). Another demonstrated responsive practice by adapting sibling meetings after recognising dynamics issues. Social workers showed creativity in adapting the MyPlan document. Multiple practitioners reported modifying the template to better suit individual children. This confidence to adapt and simplify processes, rather than rigidly following prescribed procedures, emerged as a key enabler of technical feasibility.

## Lessons for future implementation

The YPPP implementation offers lessons on achieving systemic change within family justice. We summarise six here:

- **Start small and build capacity:** Beginning with 10 LAs proved overly ambitious. This spread resources – including judicial capacity, court clerks and administrative staff and support from regional leads – thinly rather than building genuine institutional capacity. Future initiatives should start with fewer sites, enabling intensive support to develop sustainable systems before scaling.
- **Match ambition to available resource:** The YPPP required coordination between courts, LAs and legal representatives. Without dedicated coordination capacity, burden fell on overstretched individuals, creating fragile implementation dependent on exceptional circumstances rather than sustainable systems.
- **Clarify purpose and manage expectations:** A core ambiguity undermined implementation: whether the pilot primarily enables young people’s voice or serves as therapeutic intervention. This created disagreements about appropriate referrals and expectations. Future initiatives require explicit articulation of purpose before implementation.
- **Co-design tools with young people:** The MyPlan attracted widespread criticism and most young people had minimal recollection of it six months later. Tools for complex interventions require co-design. Future initiatives should involve young people in designing and testing all materials from the outset, with iterative refinement based on their feedback.
- **Build integration into existing structures:** Systemic change requires deliberate integration into existing decision-making points rather than creating parallel systems. Optional add-ons relying on individual memory will be forgotten amid competing demands. In this study, this meant embedding YPPP consideration into case review, creating automatic prompts in case management systems, and introducing standing agenda items at legal planning meetings. Without these structural anchors, individual practitioners’ good intentions are unlikely to overcome systemic pressures and competing priorities.
- **Distinguish preparation from adaptation:** Pragmatic approaches worked well for some aspects of implementation, but pragmatism could not compensate for

fundamental gaps in role clarity, training quality and tool design. Future initiatives require clarity about which elements demand rigorous preparation (role clarity, training, coordination mechanisms, co-designed materials) versus which benefit from flexible adaptation locally (specific processes, meeting logistics).

# Evaluating the YPPP: What signs of promise exist and what are the key messages for a future impact evaluation?

## What are the potential benefits of the YPPP?

The evaluation identified some signs of promise in terms of positive benefits for young people and the family justice system. These include:

- **Direct voice and empowerment:** Providing children with unfiltered opportunities to express themselves to judges directly and in their own words gave back autonomy, helping them feel involved with rather than processed by the system.
- **Well-being benefits and reduced anxiety:** Some young people described impacts on their mental health, with reports of increased confidence and reduced fear about outcomes.
- **Demystification of the process and increased understanding:** Meeting the judge in court helped some participants understand and visualise what would happen during proceedings. Some appreciated knowing they were being dealt with by real people rather than anonymous bureaucratic processes.
- **Trust building:** The pilot appeared to cultivate trust for some young people, with some increasing their trust in adults listening to them and becoming more confident in sharing their views generally. Others developed trust specifically in the judicial process, feeling they were in safe hands and would be treated fairly.
- **Acceptance of outcomes:** For some young people, meetings may have facilitated acceptance of court decisions even when they did not get the hoped-for outcome, though this is tentative given the small sample and absence of comparison groups.
- **Small but concrete changes:** Contact with pets and ensuring access to musical instruments represented improvements to young people's quality of life, though the frequency of such outcomes across the pilot remains unclear and young people did not appear to make the connection between these tangible outcomes and action taken by the judge.

- **Reassurance about parental treatment:** Some young people valued reassurance that parents were being treated fairly throughout proceedings, alleviating anxieties and addressing concerns regarding parental well-being and treatment.
- **Cultural shift and systemic benefits:** Beyond individual benefits, the pilot appeared to create some cultural change. Some judges observed the pilot made them more focused on children in family court proceedings, with some reporting meeting more children than usual in standard proceedings outside the YPPP framework. The pilot also increased awareness among some professionals that direct judicial meetings with children were viable.

## How could these benefits be measured?

The logic model provides a framework for measuring outcomes across immediate, intermediate and longer-term levels, though measurement approaches must account for implementation variability and individual differences in response to the intervention.

- **Well-being and mental health:** Pre- and post-intervention assessments using validated instruments could quantify changes. Repeated measures at multiple time points would establish whether benefits are sustained, though the finding that young people struggled with recall after six months suggests shorter intervals may be needed.
- **Agency and empowerment:** Scales measuring perceived control, voice and involvement could assess empowerment. Social worker observations would provide triangulated perspectives. However, measurement must account for variation in young people's motivations and expectations, which appear to influence outcomes.
- **Understanding and trust:** Structured assessments could measure improvements in comprehension of legal proceedings and decision-making frameworks. Trust scales could capture changes in trust towards specific adults and institutions. Given variable experiences, measures should identify factors predicting positive responses.
- **Outcome acceptance:** Future evaluation should measure young people's understanding of why decisions were made, agreement that decisions serve their best interests, and emotional adjustment to outcomes. Comparing acceptance levels between YPPP participants and those receiving standard proceedings would help establish causal relationships, though controlling for confounding factors – such as quality of relationship with carers and placement stability – would be necessary.
- **Concrete changes:** Systematic tracking of specific requests made by young people and actions taken by judges would quantify tangible impacts. Case file analysis could compare frequency and nature of child-specific provisions between YPPP cases and comparison groups, accounting for implementation variability.
- **Professional practice and cultural change:** Tracking frequency of judges meeting children in standard proceedings, surveying judges about contact with children, and documenting policy changes would measure systemic impacts. However, measures must also capture professional resistance or concerns, given evidence that acceptability varies across professional groups.

In addition to measuring benefits, a future evaluation should also assess potential harms and unintended consequences. This study has highlighted the risk of young people feeling responsible for outcomes or decisions, and experiencing distress from overwhelming environments or from being asked to share their views through the MyPlan. Qualitative exploration of young people's experiences should aim to capture negative experiences that may not be fully reflected in standardised measures.

## Lessons for future impact evaluation

These findings require cautious interpretation given the small sample of young people interviewed and the tension between positive individual experiences and implementation challenges observed across pilot sites. Future evaluation must document what happens in practice, identify barriers to implementation, and examine relationships between implementation quality and outcomes. Timing also requires attention, with shorter intervals between participation and follow-up likely to improve recall and enable connections between judicial meetings and subsequent outcomes.

Individual differences including pre-existing understanding, mental health needs, language accessibility needs, previous experiences and developmental stage should be examined systematically to identify differential impacts and conditions under which benefits materialise. Findings about accessibility for those with additional needs highlight the importance of exploring neurodivergent young people's experiences.

Future evaluation should also explore the relationship between young people's prior experiences with the care system, their framing of participation motivations and their reported outcomes. Future research should examine whether certain groups of young people require different preparation, support or adaptations to the model, while being cautious about excluding young people based on assessments of their 'motivation' or assumed capacity to benefit.

Future evaluation using comparison designs would strengthen causal inferences, but it is too early for such studies at this stage. Given the small number of positive experiences alongside implementation challenges, determining whether the intervention merits adaptation and wider rollout requires establishing both effectiveness under optimal implementation conditions and feasibility of achieving such implementation at scale. Moreover, the relatively small numbers participating even within a scaled rollout would present methodological challenges for adequately powered impact evaluation. Once these hurdles are overcome, it may be appropriate to progress to a causal design.

The evaluation suggests the YPPP – or a similar intervention focused on giving young people opportunities to speak directly to judges – may support young people's involvement in decision making when implemented well. The study provides less support for the YPPP specifically as a method of achieving this goal. Therefore, the programme itself is likely to need adaptation, and the logic model's assumptions require testing through evaluation that accounts for implementation variability, individual differences and the conditions under which benefits materialise versus when participation may offer limited value.



# Conclusion and recommendations

This evaluation of the YPPP contributes to the evidence base on children's direct participation in care proceedings. Where existing research has documented persistent gaps between policy aspirations and practice realities (Toros and Falch-Eriksen 2024), this pilot demonstrates that meaningful innovation is possible without dedicated funding but at a cost to those implementing it.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the pilot achieved what decades of policy commitment has not: creating systematic opportunities for children to meet judges making decisions about their futures. The YPPP's modest reach reflects both the challenges identified in previous research, including professional gatekeeping, capacity constraints, ambivalence about children's participation (Race and Frost 2022) and new barriers specific to formalising what was previously ad hoc practice.

Young people's largely positive experiences align with international evidence showing children value direct judicial contact (Parkinson et al. 2007) and can engage maturely with legal processes. Those who participated reported feeling heard, developing trust in judges and the judicial process, gaining a better understanding of proceedings and, in some cases, accepting difficult decisions more readily. These outcomes support the pathway's theoretical foundation in procedural justice: that fair treatment and meaningful participation matter independently of whether substantive outcomes align with children's wishes.

However, this evaluation also points to why children meeting judges has never become routine despite longstanding policy support. The barriers are not only logistical. Professional concerns from the literature relating to worries about children being pressured by parents to present particular narratives, concerns about safeguarding, and questions about how judicial contact fits within existing due process (Fernando 2009, Parkinson and Cashmore 2007) manifested in this study as disagreements about judicial role boundaries and appropriate professional responsibilities. The absence of children's guardians who would traditionally mediate between children and the court inverted these professional arrangements and left judges uncertain about their responsibilities when children raised concerns that would normally be filtered through the guardian's independent assessment.

More fundamentally, the pilot exposed enduring tensions about what children's participation actually means in practice. Research consistently shows that participation is often tokenistic with limited influence on outcomes (Toros and Falch-Eriksen 2024), and that children's views are frequently filtered through professional interpretations (Foster et al. 2021). The YPPP attempted to address this through direct communication yet struggled with its own conceptual ambiguity. The pathway oscillated between

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, the instrumental role of funding being made available or withdrawn has been identified as a major factor in the expansion and contraction of FDAC sites in the period since its initial rollout (Pawson and Tilley 1997).

positioning itself as a participation tool enabling children to express their views, and functioning as a behaviour change intervention requiring children to agree to specific actions.

The evaluation identified conditions under which benefits materialised: adequate preparation, judges comfortable with direct engagement and skilled at building rapport while maintaining boundaries and accessible communication. Crucially, these conditions proved dependent on individual champions rather than sustainable systems. Success required committed judges willing to use lunch breaks, court clerks exercising flexibility beyond their formal role, and social workers absorbing additional responsibilities they deemed worthwhile because they valued children having voice in proceedings. This dependency on champions, while enabling initial implementation, would prove unsustainable at scale.

The pilot's achievement lies not in resolving these tensions but in making them visible. Where previous research has documented barriers to participation largely through surveys and retrospective accounts, this evaluation captures the messy reality of attempting systemic change within established court processes. It reveals the gap between professional commitment to children's participation in principle and the practical, conceptual and resource challenges of delivering this consistently in practice.

The pathway's theoretical promise – that direct engagement between children and judges can enhance procedural justice, reduce anxiety, build trust and improve decision acceptance – showed signs of materialising for some young people under certain conditions. Realising this potential more widely requires addressing fundamental questions the pilot left unresolved: clarity about purpose (voice versus behaviour change), resolution of professional boundaries (judicial independence versus relationship building, guardian involvement versus exclusion), and development of sustainable implementation models that enable rather than depend on individual commitment. Without such foundations, attempts to scale risk either replicating fragile implementation dependent on exceptional circumstances, or allowing what remains a powerful idea about children's participation to quietly fade as goodwill becomes exhausted.

## Recommendations

### For system leaders

- **Resolve conceptual clarity before wider implementation:** Explicitly articulate whether the primary purpose is to enable young people's participation or to serve as an intervention for behaviour change. If, as expected, the former then modify programme materials in line with this.
- **Mandate systematic consideration without specific pathways:** Mandatory checklist questions at case management hearings enable systematic, case-by-case consideration while avoiding bureaucratic burden.
- **Promote awareness of children's opportunities to participate:** Professionals in this study were often unaware of both the pilot and that young people were already able to meet with judges where appropriate. Better awareness of young people's avenues to direct participation in care proceedings is needed.

- **Address the Cafcass participation gap:** Future implementation requires clarity about guardian involvement in meetings between judges and children.

### For practitioners and LAs

- **Co-design tools with young people:** The MyPlan requires fundamental redesign through iterative co-design with young people of different ages and abilities to ensure materials are visually accessible, developmentally appropriate and participatory.
- **Integrate systematically into existing decision-making structures:** Success, particularly where initiatives are not funded, depends on embedding participation within care planning panels, legal gateway meetings and case management processes rather than creating parallel systems.
- **Start small and build genuine capacity:** Begin with fewer sites receiving intensive support to develop sustainable systems before scaling, matching ambition to available resources.

### For future evaluation

- **Measure implementation fidelity alongside outcomes:** Future evaluation must distinguish between intervention effects and implementation quality effects, documenting what happens in practice and examining relationships between implementation quality and outcomes.
- **Examine conditions under which benefits materialise:** Assess individual differences, preparation quality and judicial approach to examine further for whom and under what circumstances the intervention offers value versus limited benefit.

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# Appendix: Methodology

## Design

We employed a realist-informed implementation and process evaluation (IPE). An IPE focuses on understanding how an intervention is delivered, what works well, what does not work and why. Unlike efficacy studies that test whether an intervention works under controlled conditions, IPEs examine the real-world implementation of interventions to understand the mechanisms that lead to outcomes and the contextual factors that influence success.

Realist-informed IPEs are suitable for understanding what works for whom, how, why and in what specific circumstances and local contexts (Pawson and Tilley 1997). We employed a realist-informed mixed-methods approach for two reasons. First, at this relatively early stage in the development of the YPPP, we sought to provide learning and feedback to LAs and LFJBs about how practitioners delivered the programme. Second, the YPPP constitutes a complex intervention comprising several interacting components (meetings with judges delivered concurrently with the MyPlan framework during ongoing care proceedings) delivered to a population with highly complex needs, for whom we anticipated a varied range of outcomes. Complex interventions are particularly suited to realist-informed approaches.

## Consultation

We developed the project design and data collection materials, including the young people's questionnaire, in consultation with the Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB). This consultation ensured that we conducted the evaluation in a way that would be meaningful and engaging for young people. The FJYPB provided feedback on the interview materials through a workshop, and several care-experienced members took part in logic model development activities.

## Sampling and recruitment

We originally proposed a purposive sampling strategy based on a range of criteria including age, ethnicity, care plan, and need and risk profiles to ensure balance across criteria of interest. However, due to lower numbers than we anticipated, we employed snowball sampling instead. We recruited professional participants through the participating LAs, with regional leads acting as central points of contact to cascade information about the study and circulate opportunities to participate. We approached young people about participating through their social workers, who provided them and their carers with child-friendly information sheets about the study.

We were unable to use the same approach to recruit parents to the study, in part because social workers found it difficult to approach parents about participation during care proceedings. Instead, we used a network of personal contacts to reach out to potential participants in England and Wales. We used our team's contacts in parental



advocacy and public involvement to recruit parents with experience of going through non-YPPP care proceedings. These parents took part in a focus group online.

## Data collection

### Quantitative data

Quantitative data collection comprised anonymised aggregated throughput data gathered through LAs. The original plan was to collect data on the number of meetings attended, duration of proceedings and basic demographics of who participated in the pathway. However, we revised our original plan and instead focused on high-level throughput numbers due to implementation delays and data-sharing complexities. We contacted LAs and asked them to provide data on:

- the number of cases where children met the age criteria for participating in the YPPP that were issued during the piloting period
- the number of eligible children in these cases
- the number of cases that entered the YPPP, where 'entered' meant a child or young person had met with a judge at least once
- the number of young people who met with a judge.

We used this throughput data to calculate basic descriptive statistics on the number of children and cases who took part, as a proportion of the total eligible cases per LA and per LFJB.

### Qualitative data

Qualitative data formed the primary component of our evaluation and included semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in the YPPP (n=36) and a focus group with parents who had experienced (non-YPPP) proceedings (n=5). Several of these parents had children who had met the judge during care proceedings, as a one-off meeting at the end for the judge to explain the outcome of the court proceedings to the children.

Semi-structured interviews with professionals explored experiences, perceptions and attitudes of those involved in delivering the YPPP, while interviews with young people focused on their experiences of participation. We selected semi-structured interviews as our primary data collection method because they allowed us to explore participants' experiences, perceptions and attitudes towards the YPPP in depth while maintaining sufficient flexibility to adapt to different participant groups' needs and circumstances. We found this approach particularly important given the diverse range of stakeholders we involved (young people, professionals, judges) and our need to explore both implementation processes and participant experiences. We conducted all interviews and focus groups online and transcribed them verbatim for analysis.

## Analysis

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and anonymised before being compiled for analysis. We analysed qualitative data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The team coded transcripts individually and then shared, compared and refined our coding during data analysis sessions. We conducted the analysis initially by participant group to identify themes specific to each stakeholder perspective (young people, social workers, judges, etc.), allowing us to understand how different groups experienced and perceived the YPPP. Following this initial within-group analysis, we cross-referenced findings across participant groups to corroborate themes and identify areas of convergence and divergence in perspectives. From this foundation, we developed themes according to prominent trends, similarities and differences in experiences across participant groups. This collaborative approach enabled us to build a comprehensive understanding of the YPPP implementation experience while maintaining sensitivity to the different viewpoints of various stakeholders.

We guided our analysis using the implementation outcome framework developed by Proctor et al. (2011), which provided a systematic approach for evaluating implementation processes. From this framework, we applied six key implementation outcome categories: acceptability, adoption, appropriateness, feasibility, fidelity and sustainability. These categories guided our analysis by providing a structured lens through which we examined stakeholder perspectives and experiences of implementation. We found this framework particularly valuable for our evaluation as it enabled us to examine implementation processes systematically across different stakeholder groups while maintaining focus on outcomes relevant to future scaling and sustainability of the intervention.

Data analysis was enriched through the development of a logic model theorising the intervention's causal pathways. The model was developed through a collaborative workshop with key stakeholders, including project leads, professionals and young people with lived experience of care proceedings. This workshop explored stakeholder perspectives on the changes the YPPP was expected to generate. The research team synthesised workshop notes with data from interviews and focus groups to construct provisional if-then statements articulating hypothesised context-mechanism-outcome configurations. This process yielded 96 initial if-then statements across all data sources. We then systematically consolidated these, removed duplicates and refined our understanding of the underlying mechanisms through which the YPPP operates. The resulting logic model provided a theory-driven framework for understanding how, why and under what conditions the intervention produces its effects.

## Ethics

We secured ethical approval for the study through a specialist review process facilitated by the Nuffield FJO that involved experts in family justice research reviewing our application. We obtained informed consent from all participants before data collection. We gave participants accessible information about the aims, purpose and potential implications of the study, and informed them of their right to withdraw themselves and their data at any time up to four weeks after participating. For young people aged 16 and over, they could consent to participation themselves. For those under 16, we required consent from a supporting adult with parental responsibility – either a parent or social worker (as a representative of the LA with parental responsibility for the young person). Young people under 16 provided assent. Where parents shared parental responsibility and the social worker consented for an under-16-year-old, the LA took responsibility to notify the parent(s). We gave all young people a £25 e-voucher of their choice as a thank you for taking part in the research.

## Methodological limitations

Our primary limitation was our inability to recruit sufficient numbers of young people to participate in the evaluation. We originally planned to interview 15–20 young people but ultimately interviewed only six. This occurred because fewer young people participated in the YPPP pilot than anticipated. This smaller sample size reduced our ability to capture diverse experiences and perspectives from young people, the primary beneficiaries of the intervention. However, we maintained the number of professional interviews broadly consistent with our original plans, as these could focus on implementation experiences even with limited direct participation in the pilot.

A related limitation was that not all LAs implemented the YPPP during our evaluation period. This reduced the range of implementation contexts we could examine and limited our ability to understand how the YPPP might work across different organisational settings and local contexts. These limitations mean our findings provide valuable insights into early implementation experiences but cannot be considered comprehensive or fully representative of all potential YPPP implementations or participant experiences. Our conclusions about implementation processes and participant experiences should be interpreted within this context.

# Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

## Rubric Social Research

Rubric Social Research is an independent research organisation focused on improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families through rigorous evaluation. Led by Dr Rebecca Jones and David Westlake, Rubric partners with charities, government bodies and other organisations to design, develop and evaluate interventions in children's social care and the family justice system. Rubric works with a network of academic collaborators across England and Wales, combining methodological expertise with a shared commitment to research that changes how children and families are supported.

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