

Young people meeting judges: What we learnt from a pilot with young people in care proceedings



This summary presents the main findings of an evaluation of the Young People's Participation Pathway – a pilot to enhance the direct participation of young people in care proceedings by enabling them to meet regularly with the judges responsible for decisions about their futures. It highlights the experiences of both young people and professionals, providing insights and perspectives as to how the meetings might work better.

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Disclaimer

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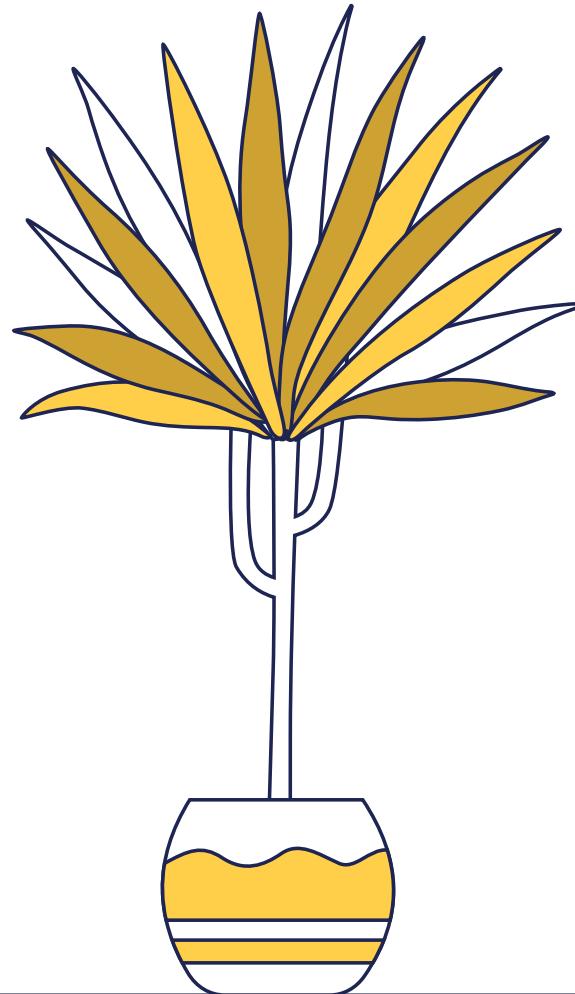
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Written in partnership with



Background

What was the pilot about?

The Young People's Participation Pathway (YPPP) was a pilot intervention designed to enhance the direct participation of young people in care proceedings by enabling them to meet regularly with the judges responsible for decisions about their futures. Traditionally, children are represented indirectly in court through professionals – but this often leaves them (and young people in particular) feeling excluded and disempowered.

The YPPP was developed by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory and builds on other work, including the Adolescent Court Project piloted in Coventry and Warwickshire (2017–2020). It aimed to address the 'participation gap' by offering structured, judge-led meetings supported by a MyPlan document that helps young people articulate their views and think about what they want their life to be like. The pilot was implemented without any additional financial resources.

When did it take place and who was involved?

The pilot ran from August 2024 to July 2025 across two local family justice board (LFJB) areas, involving four local areas. Through YPPP, 24 young people (aged 10–17) across 19 cases met with judges, representing approximately 26% of eligible cases in implementing areas. The pilot explored whether direct participation could be systematically embedded within existing court processes and whether such engagement could improve young people's experiences, understanding and acceptance of court decisions.

What does this summary do?

This summary presents key findings from an independent evaluation of the pilot by Rubric Social Research Ltd, which involved carrying out and analysing 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).

How can I find out more?

To find out more, read the full evaluation report: <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/young-people-meeting-judges-pilot-learnings-report.pdf>

How to get in touch

For all questions on the research and our work in this area, please contact: contactfjo@nuffieldfoundation.org

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“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 felt I could put all my trust in her because I knew she’d do something good for me.”

A young person in the pilot

Findings

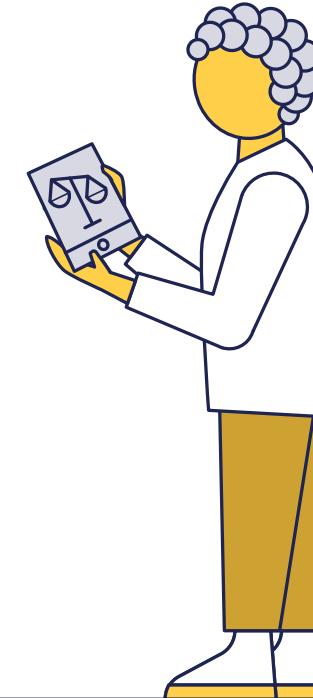
Meeting with and speaking to judges made many of the young people involved in our pilot feel heard

Most young people valued meeting judges, felt heard and appreciated being treated as individuals. Small but meaningful changes were sometimes made to their arrangements after their meetings with judges, such as access to pets and personal items.

Meetings helped demystify court processes and reduce anxiety.

Some young people accepted difficult decisions after meeting judges, even when outcomes did not align with their wishes, and some professionals attributed this to being more involved and trusting they and their parents would be treated fairly.

These findings align with international evidence that children want to meet with judges. They think it is fairer to have judicial processes where they are heard directly.¹



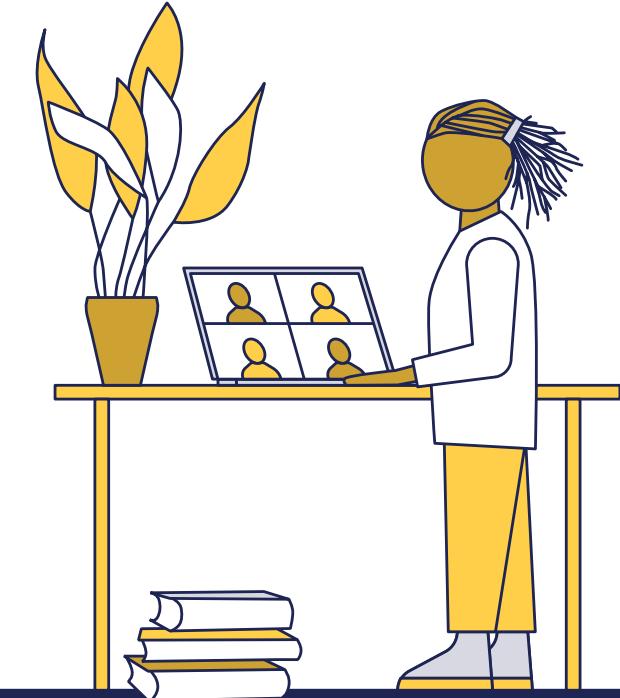
¹ Parkinson, P., Cashmore, J. and Single, J. (2007). Parents' and children's views on talking to judges in parenting disputes in Australia. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 21(1), 84–107. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.961998>. See the full report for further reading: <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/young-people-meeting-judges-pilot-learnings-report.pdf>

Although there was fairly widespread commitment to the idea of young people meeting with judges in principle, the pilot revealed some reservations and differences in perspective among professionals and parents

Social workers and team managers: Social workers were generally supportive, viewing the YPPP as empowering and manageable within existing workloads. This was surprising given their high workload. The YPPP enabled social workers to take a more active role in supporting children through the court process, empowering social workers and helping young people to feel that things were done with them rather than to them.

Judges: Judges had mixed views on the pilot. Some were passionate advocates; others felt uncomfortable with what they saw as a blurring of role boundaries. Some were already consistent in their practice of meeting with older children during court proceedings. Others had poor experiences with challenging behaviour and conflict during meetings. There was consensus that giving children a voice was important, but judges' personal perspectives and differing experiences of implementation affected their views of the model's workability in practice.

Parents (interviewed outside pilot areas): Parents were unexpectedly supportive of the idea in theory, advocating for multiple meetings to reduce confusion and mistrust.



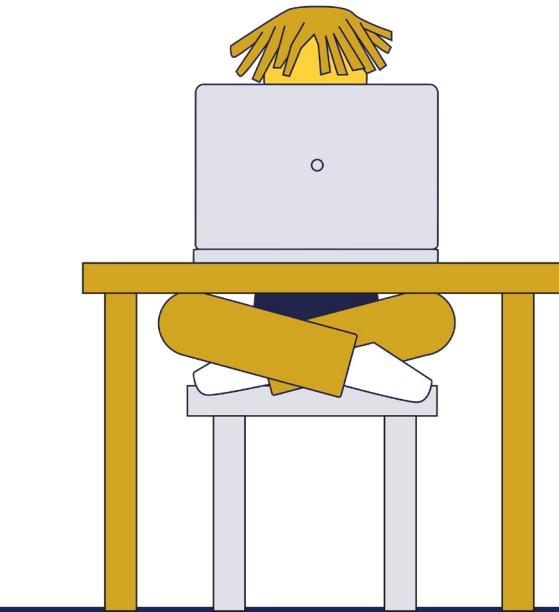
Variations in practice hinted at resourcing issues; though some of the other practical challenges could be addressed through additional guidance and training

Actual implementation of the pilot (number of meetings with judges and use of tools such as MyPlan) varied.

It was originally envisaged that there might be up to six meetings per young person – on average they met with judges on between one and three occasions. This was either due to preference or the fact that professionals did not see the benefit of having further meetings while proceedings were ongoing.

The MyPlan tool – a document that young people went through with their social worker in advance of their meeting to help them convey their views – had mixed reviews; some found it helpful for preparation, others barely remembered it, and professionals felt it was not young-person friendly.

The evaluation found that success depended on individual champions rather than sustainable systems, raising concerns about scalability and what could be implemented without additional resources.



Given their special role in advising on children's best interests, future meetings with judges should also include Cafcass guardians

Cafcass guardians did not formally participate in the pilot, which created role confusion and gaps in representation. Future implementation of models with children meeting with judges should include Cafcass given their role in gathering children's views and advising on the best interest of children in court.

Some judges reported a wider cultural shift, including meeting children more often outside of the pilot



“If they haven’t got their XBox 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

Recommendations

Offer meetings with judges – there is value for young people

Young people are already able to meet with judges where appropriate, but there is a lack of awareness of this among social workers. Young people's positive experiences in this pilot – including feeling heard, developing trust in the judicial process and better understanding the court process – underline the importance of direct participation for procedural justice and young people's well-being. However, training and support for judges needs to be considered so that they can successfully manage this type of participation.

Integrate meetings into existing structures

Implementation worked best when the model was seen to build on existing good practices and systems. Integrating participation into existing structures within the local authority and court – such as planning panels, legal gateway meetings and case management processes – can reduce the administrative burden and enhance scalability.

Co-design meeting tools with young people and practitioners

The MyPlan document was felt to be not fit for purpose; although some young people found it a helpful meeting preparation tool, the quasi-contractual design presented barriers to completion. More adaptations are needed to ensure that any tools to support participation are visually accessible, appropriate and secure meaningful engagement from young people.

Increase judicial dialogue and training

Some of the barriers to implementation centred on inadequate training for judges when meeting with young people, as well as uncertainties regarding their role and the purpose of the meetings. Dialogue within the judiciary – as well as supportive and appropriate training to clarify judges' roles and expectations – may support cultural change and improve judicial confidence.

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.

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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.

