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[Previous Page](#)[Next Page](#)

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## **News Release**

13/12/2000

### **THE CHANGING CULTURE OF YOUTH COURTS - AN EVALUATION OF THE YOUTH COURT DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

Youth courts can enhance their effectiveness in dealing with juvenile offending by becoming more accessible to offenders, their families and victims, concludes a report published by the Home Office today.

The report, 'Evaluation of the Youth Court Demonstration Project,' analyses the results of two pilot projects conducted in youth courts in Rotherham and Leicestershire and Rutland between October 1998 and March 2000.

The pilots successfully introduced changes to the courts' practice, procedure and physical layout at minimal cost in order to make them more accessible and open. These included:

- using clear language to explain to defendants what is happening in court, examining their circumstances and encouraging them to take responsibility for their behaviour and plans for change;
- a more informal court layout to aid communication such as seating the magistrate at the same level or slightly higher than the defendant, no dock and seating defendants next to their solicitor;
- greater provision to accommodate victims either at court if they wished to attend or through providing timely information to them about the case;
- developing feedback to magistrates on reconviction rates, breaches and completion of sentences;
- considering the lifting of reporting restrictions, which normally forbid the naming of under-age defendants, where appropriate.

From next year, all youth courts in England and Wales will be encouraged to adapt the reforms to local conditions, with the report's recommendations being issued in the form of joint guidance from the Home Office and Lord Chancellor's Department.

Welcoming the report, Home Secretary, Jack Straw, said:

"I commend this report to everyone involved in the youth justice system. Accessibility and openness is crucial to putting offenders and their victims at the heart of the youth justice process. Offenders must understand and learn from the consequences of their behaviour, and victims must be assured that their interests are fully respected. Before we began our programme of youth justice reform, the system was frankly, too much of a 'secret garden' for anyone's good."

Encouraging youth courts to take up the challenge laid down by the report, the Lord Chancellor said:

"This report provides a valuable insight into how inexpensive changes to practice and procedure can secure both effective participation by young defendants and the confidence of victims and the public in the youth courts.

"Of course, some courts are already tackling these issues through local initiatives, but by acting together on the report's recommendations, we can work to ensure that all youth courts adopt an approach which is more focussed on changing the young offender's behaviour."

The projects were evaluated by researchers from Sheffield University. Summarising the success of the pilots, the report concludes that:

- **greater engagement between magistrates' and defendants** helped draw defendants into the court process and encouraged them to take responsibility for their offending behaviour and plans for change;
- **a more informal court layout** encouraged defendants to participate more fully in the court process without infringing the dignity and security of the court;
- **greater provision to accommodate victims** received considerable support; while most victims preferred to be engaged in the process through receiving information rather than attending court, the report highlights ways in which practical concerns can be overcome and enhance the support for victims who would choose to attend;
- **the development of effective feedback to sentencers** was welcomed by magistrates and other court users - who were particularly interested in reconviction rates and the rate at which sentences were completed or breached - to aid their understanding of the outcome of the penalties they imposed to punish and tackle offenders' behaviour;

- **the lifting of reporting restrictions where appropriate** was felt to be useful on occasion, but it was understood that this should be used cautiously to avoid enhancing offenders' status among their peers; naming of offenders, when necessary, should be done to alert the community to persistent, serious offenders rather than being used as a punishment.

The joint guidance is expected to be issued in the new year, and a working party of the Home Office, Lord Chancellor's Department, Magistrate's Association and the Judicial Studies Board will help courts implement changes according to local conditions. Courts will be asked to report back on progress in 12 months.

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

1. The Report has been considered by the two pilot courts, the Magistrates' Association, the Justices' Clerks' Society, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Youth Justice Board, and the Judicial Studies Board. They welcome the Report and its recommendations:

### **Bob Shillito, Chairman of the Panel, Rotherham Youth Court:**

"The report is fair, balanced and contains many well reasoned and realistic recommendations. We are pleased to commend the report to youth courts and youth justice agencies throughout the country and are confident that the culture changes proposed will lead to greater public confidence in the youth justice system and a reduction in youth crime."

### **John Smail JP, Chairman, Leicestershire and Rutland Youth Court Demonstration Project:**

"The project demonstrates that, by the court engaging offenders and their parents and finding out which sentences are most effective, magistrates have a greater opportunity to reduce offending by young people. Opening up the youth court and encouraging the media to report on its work will give the community greater confidence in the criminal justice system."

### **Alex Kilpatrick, Chair of the Youth Court Committee, Magistrates' Association:**

"I visited both courts and was favourably impressed with the changes which had been made. How we conduct cases in court can have a powerful impact on the offender and there is much good sense here on which even the most experienced of us can draw. I commend this approach."

### **Kevin McCormac, President, Justices' Clerks' Society:**

"The Society is very encouraged by the results of the pilot project. It has shown that changes to the courts' practice, procedure and physical layout can improve the involvement of victims and defendants and the effectiveness of sentences passed. National adoption of the recommendations, supported by appropriate guidance, will justifiably increase confidence in the criminal justice system for all concerned."

**Ross Cranston QC MP, Solicitor General:**

"The Crown Prosecution Service welcomes this report and envisages that it will make the youth court more accessible and more comprehensible to defendants and victims alike. We commend the focus on changing the young offender's behaviour through effective engagement with young offenders and their parents. Better understanding of the court processes on the part of young offenders and victims, and feedback to sentencers will enhance the efficacy of the youth court."

**Lord Warner, Chairman of the Youth Justice Board:**

"The YJB welcomes the stronger emphasis on using sentencing to prevent future offending and supports the principle of sensitively handled victim involvement, where that can help victims gain satisfaction from the legal process. In future the Board will be able to assist sentencers by providing data on sentence outcomes available through the local Youth Offending Team."

**Michael Woolley, Senior Training Adviser, Judicial Studies Board:**

"The Demonstration Project has shown in the pilot areas that effective engagement between magistrates, young defendants and their parents at all stages of the process in the court room had a very positive effect on the way young people, their parents and the magistrates viewed the proceedings.

"The Judicial Studies Board will be working in partnership with other organisations to develop and promote training to enable magistrates acquire the necessary skills for effective engagement. The Board commends the work already done in the pilot areas in taking this initiative forward."

2. The report, 'Evaluation of the Youth Court Demonstration Project,' by Charlotte Allen, Iain Crow and Michael Cavadino, from the University of Sheffield's Centre

for Criminological and Legal Research, is published as a Home Office Research Study. Media copies of the report are available from the Home Office press office on 020 7273 4545. Non-media copies are available from the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Unit on 020 7273 2084. The report is also published on the Home Office website at [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.htm)

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[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

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