



## **“ALL THAT YOT PALAVER”**

### **AN EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM**

**Rowan Associates and Lin Whitfield Consultancy  
March 2007**

## **Background**

In late 2005 the Yot commissioned an independent evaluation of service provision as experienced by parents/carers and young people. Although the Yot has consistently performed to a high standard against the Youth Justice Board's Performance Management Framework the overall performance is generated through aggregating a number of different performance areas. These areas include Key Performance Indicators, National Standards Compliance, Effective Practice Quality Assurance and Reoffending Performance.

However, none of the areas included in the YJB Performance Management Framework relate to how those on the receiving end of the Yot's work, i.e. parents/carers and young people, experience those services.

The independent evaluation set out to identify the impact of Yot services, and the views of parents and young people on the effectiveness and quality of services received.

The Yot is committed to fully integrate the recommendations of this independent evaluation and ensure where possible they become integrated into service provision.

**Steve Waters**  
Youth Offending  
Service Manager

# **Contents**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	Page 1
Section 1: Introduction and Background	Page 7
Section 2: Aims, Objectives and Methodology	Page 9
Section 3: Findings	Page 13
Section 4: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations	Page 31

# “ALL THAT YOT PALAVER”: AN EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM

Executive Summary : March 2007

## 1. Introduction

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 required all Local Authorities to establish a Youth Offending Team (YOT) in their council area. Each YOT had to include police officers, social workers and probation officers as well as staff from health and education services. The framework in which YOTs work is one which straddles two systems: that of criminal justice, which is largely geared to adults, and the child care system. These can often contradict or conflict with each other.

YOTs are measured and assessed against a range of standards, key performance indicators and targets which are set by the Youth Justice Board. At the time of writing, South Gloucestershire YOT is rated as the highest performing YOT in the country. South Gloucestershire YOT is aware, however, that meeting standards, key performance indicators and targets is not the only way to measure the effectiveness of the YOT's work. The views of young people and their parents or carers can provide another important perspective on the quality and impact of its work. Therefore, in March 2006 South Gloucestershire YOT commissioned an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of their work. The evaluation was carried out by Rowan Associates and Lin Whitfield Consultancy, and took place between April 2006 and March 2007.

## 2. Aims and objectives

The main aim of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the work of South Gloucestershire YOT through investigating the experiences of young people and their parents or carers in their dealings with the YOT. Effectiveness is a wide-ranging term. Following an initial period of familiarisation and desk research, and discussions with members of the YOT, it was decided to focus on four broad dimensions of effectiveness:

1. The extent to which clients **understand** what's going on.
2. The extent to which clients feel **involved and included** in what's going on.
3. The extent to which the YOT's work takes account of clients' whole lives i.e. is **holistic and realistic**.
4. The **outcomes and changes** for clients as a result of the YOT's work.

Clients' mandatory involvement with the Youth Justice system covers three stages:

- The court process
- The panel meeting
- The intervention programme

All were discussed by young people and their families, and are considered by the evaluation.

32 interviews were undertaken over the period from the end of August 2006 until the beginning of February 2007. 16 were with young people, and 16 with parents, not all of them from the same families.

### **3. Findings**

The evaluation found that South Gloucestershire YOT is highly effective. It works extremely well in difficult, resource-constrained circumstances. It responds to the diverse and specific needs of its client group with a high level of flexibility, particularly in the context of working within the structure of the Youth Justice system. It was noticeable that YOT interventions are welcomed (primarily by parents) and valued by most of the young people interviewed for this evaluation. This finding deserves attention: the relationship between YOT staff and young people is a compulsory one. We analysed the factors that underpin these positive relationships, and found that South Gloucestershire YOT staff communicate effectively with young people, and this enables them to build trust and both win and engender respect. As a result, young people working with South Gloucestershire YOT were seen to make some real and often lasting changes through their work with the YOT.

#### **Stage 1 – the court process**

For young people and their parents or carers, the court process represents a major way marker along the path of their involvement with the Youth Justice system. Parents, more than young people, discussed the impact of, and their responses to, the court process. All the parents who were interviewed felt that their child deserved to go to court and to be punished for what they had done. Concerns were expressed about the process. While these are beyond the scope of the YOT to influence, they do cloud the experience of young people and families, and this inevitably influences their initial relationships with YOT staff.

Young people and their parents and carers discussed their frustration and anger about the length of the waits, the number of adjournments, and the loss of paperwork or other evidence. They typically found that when they actually got inside the court, the experience was alien and excluding, with conversations taking place between professionals and not with young people and their parents/carers. Many clients did not fully understand the system. Unlike YOT staff, court staff were described as being poor communicators. The court system took little account of the real lives of the people who use it – for example that parents might have to take whole days off work (often losing a day's pay) to attend with their children, only to have the case adjourned and have to do it all over again on another date. Parents described how YOT staff were helpful and did explain the system and what would happen next, but that this information was sometimes difficult to take in, particularly if the family was distressed by the circumstances. For young people, the court offered little deterrence, and an important opportunity is lost for young people to become aware of the consequences of their actions.

#### **Stage 2 – the panel meeting**

Referral panels were set up in 2002 for young offenders who plead guilty and are convicted for the first time. Each panel consists of two volunteers from the local community and one member of the YOT acting as an advisor. Young people seem to see the panel as another part of the bureaucratic end of the Youth Justice system:

something they “have” to do. For parents and carers, the panel can be more a more helpful process in that it gives them information about the system and process.

### **Stage 3 – the intervention programme**

Given the negative experience of the early (pre-YOT) stages of the Youth Justice system, it was particularly noteworthy that the majority of interviewees reported very positive relationships with YOT staff. All parents were pleased and grateful about the support and work of the YOT with their child. Although the service is compulsory, none of them expressed the view that they would rather not be working with the YOT if there was a choice.

**Understanding:** All but one of the parents or carers felt that the assessment report process was positive and constructive, and that the questions were not unduly intrusive. Most feel able to ask questions and build their understanding, although as work progresses with young people, the contact between parents and YOT staff decreases.

In general, young people have found the written information they have received from YOT staff to be clear, accessible and specific. All said that they appreciated YOT staff giving them accurate, clear and honest information, for example about drugs, about the options and choices which could enable them to make changes, about crime, and about the consequences of their behaviour. Young people seem to benefit from the whole package of information they are given by the different members of the YOT team, for example some dealing with health issues, some with drugs and some with offending behaviour. The Impact Road Show was described as being particularly powerful in this regard.

**Involved and included:** This dimension considers whether YOT work is centred on young people and their families, and on the extent to which they feel they are active participants in the YOT programme or whether they feel they are being “done to”. All the young people interviewed felt that they were involved and included in the programme: “*it’s all about me*” was expressed by several of them. Inevitably, parents had a different experience and some discussed ways in which they would like to be better informed about the work with their children. Their comments raise issues about feedback systems to enable parents to support the YOT’s work with their children.

**Effective communication:** This was identified as a critical theme, and is discussed in some depth. It was clear that the quality and nature of communication between YOT staff and young people and their parents is an underpinning factor which enables young people to feel involved in a process of change. Young people are concerned not only with what is said, but also with the way it is said. Good communication enables YOT staff to develop effective relationships, and this is the basis on which they either do, or do not, pass on the messages underpinning YOT programmes. We have identified several factors which contribute to effective communication between YOT staff and young people. These are:

- Trust
- Paying attention
- Not judging
- Respect

Humour was also highlighted by some young people. Most also spoke of the importance of feeling that their YOT worker was “on their side”. Several young people commented that, while YOT staff “*make you realise you’ve done wrong*”, they don’t judge young people for their previous actions. One young person described staff as “*not preachy or teachy*” - an approach that is appreciated. Most of the young people interviewed commented on the respect that is shown to them by YOT staff, and how this enables positive change, while *not* being treated with respect was a factor influencing their offending behaviour.

It was clear that South Gloucestershire YOT staff are skilled and effective in the way they communicate with young people, and that this enables them to build positive relationships, and so enable real and positive changes in young people’s attitudes in relation to their offending and towards themselves. For many young people, the capacity for open, honest communication enables them to express their concerns and vulnerabilities. This gives them a rare and valuable opportunity for expression and reflection, which also enables change.

Parents and carers also made many positive comments about the YOT staff and their communication skills. Most of the YOT staff made an instant and very positive impression when they first met parents and carers to carry out the assessment report process.

**Negative factors:** Factors undermining the relationship between young people or their families and YOT staff are primarily associated with poor communication. For young people, the most common factor undermining YOT input was inconsistencies on the part of YOT staff. Mainly this was associated with lateness, or not delivering what was offered. Some parents described feeling patronised on occasion.

**Holistic and realistic:** The evaluation explored whether the elements of the programme

- effectively addressed the perceived needs of each young person
- were realistic in the way they addressed these needs
- responded flexibly to both young people’s needs, and other issues/circumstances/demands in their lives

Most young people saw the work they were doing as both appropriate and useful. Programmes were described as picking out themes that needed addressing in their lives: issues that may have been directly relevant to the offending, or that contributed to difficulties in their lives and consequently had an indirect relationship with their offending. It helps to “*get you on the right tracks*”.

Several young people described how work on anger management brought about positive changes in their responses to difficult situations: to their relationships with family, friends, or at school. Some described how work on peer group pressure enabled them to make positive decisions about changing their friendship circles, or to be more assertive with their friends. By addressing the social issues which influence offending, YOT interventions were seen to be realistic by the young people.

Several of the young people interviewed discussed the ways in which their work with

the YOT gave them “*practical tips*”, and tools which help young people and parents to communicate better and reach compromises which made home life much better.

YOT staff offer additional support to young people through their links with other agencies, in particular Connexions. South Gloucestershire YOT’s multi-agency approach includes bringing in the resources of Elevations (an independent youth work organisation) for young people on ISSP. This was described as being a very positive element of the programme that offers a wide ranging and creative programme.

Parents and carers were overwhelmingly positive about the programmes that the young people were following and the work that YOT staff were doing.

**Lack of flexibility:** There were a number of instances which young people described where the programme offered little flexibility, and this impeded the effectiveness of the YOT’s work. As a mainly compulsory service with significant emphasis on enforcement, the YOT is of course limited in how much flexibility it can offer young people and their families.

**Outcomes:** The evaluation considered what has changed as a result of YOT intervention. Young people identified a range of impacts of their work with the YOT, including better understanding of the consequences of their actions, and the ability to receive and act on the information they were given. Drug information and the Impact Road Show were described as particularly helpful in this respect. Elements of the programme, such as anger management, were seen to have enabled real changes for young people.

Parents or carers also talked about the positive changes they were noticing as the young people were going through their programme, some of which were quite dramatic, such as stopping the use of drugs, stopping thieving, fighting less with parents or siblings, or saving money. Several of the older young people were actively seeking employment and making more positive choices about their actions in the future.

Underpinning this are valuable lessons about how to communicate more constructively with people, based on respect. It was clear from the interviews with young people that this message is given by YOT staff modelling an approach based on respect. A number of parents also commented on signs, sometimes quite small, of behavioural change which were resulting in more respectful relationships.

By listening, not judging, and allowing young people to feel they have worked things out for themselves, South Gloucestershire YOT staff enable young people to **think differently**, and to learn from the work. This often, and most powerfully, enables young people themselves to choose to change. Arguably it is the YOT intervention that prompts and enables this choice, and young people spoke of valuing YOT staff support in putting their changes into effect, and keeping their resolve. It was noticeable, however, that the most strenuously asserted “choices” were made by young people themselves.

**Invisible enabling:** We describe as “invisible enabling” the ways in which South Gloucestershire YOT staff use excellent communication skills to underpin the effectiveness of their work. The evaluation found that change in young people’s behaviour may be motivated by the YOT work directly, by personal choices – or by a desire to grow up. Usually change seems to occur through a combination of all three, and while families were more likely to attribute changes in their children to their work with the YOT, young people were more likely to assert that the decision to change was theirs.

We were struck by the unobtrusive way YOT staff approach this challenge. Given that the role is a statutory one, this is particularly note-worthy. By handing the decisions to young people (albeit in reality, guiding those decisions carefully), young people feel empowered about their choices: thinking you have done something yourself embeds the lessons that guide the choices and the changes. In this way, South Gloucestershire YOT acts as a catalyst for lasting change.

YOTs are expected to apply finite resources to an infinite (and certainly unknown) level of need. South Gloucestershire YOT is extremely effective in its work. Young people working with South Gloucestershire YOT were seen to make some real and often lasting changes through their work with the YOT.

# “ALL THAT YOT PALAVER”: AN EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE YOUTH OFFENDING TEAM

## SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### 1. 1. Introduction

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 required all Local Authorities to establish a Youth Offending Team (YOT) in their council area. Each YOT had to include police officers, social workers and probation officers as well as staff from health and education services. The framework in which YOTs work is one which straddles two systems: that of criminal justice, which is largely geared to adults, and the child care system. These can often contradict or conflict with each other.

South Gloucestershire YOT is a multi-agency partnership based in Filton which is part of the wider community safety partnership. The team works closely with Safer South Gloucestershire (the Community Safety Team and Drugs Action Team) to prevent offending by children and young people. This is achieved by working together with young people and their parents or carers, the victims of crime, and other agencies or organisations including the local community.

The main areas of work for YOTs are:

- To reduce the risk of further offending by young people and to help them to face up to the consequences of offending
- To support young people who are bailed by the courts
- To prepare reports for the courts
- To supervise young people on court orders
- To assist with arrangements for a young person remanded to local authority care by the courts
- To support young people during sentence and on release from custodial sentences
- To assist parents through voluntary support and through Parenting Orders
- To provide Appropriate Adult Services when a young person is being questioned by the police and a parent is unable to attend
- To work with and support victims

## **1.2. Background**

YOTs are measured and assessed against a range of standards, key performance indicators and targets which are set by the Youth Justice Board. South Gloucestershire YOT is rated as the highest performing YOT in the country. Its overall performance summary for the period April – December 2006 shows:

- A performance level of 5, against a national average of 2
- An overall performance across 20 Key Performance Indicators of 88.3%, against a national average of 81.6%
- Compliance against National Standards of 100%, against a national average of 73.1%
- A National Standards improvement of 100%, against a national average of 50.5%

South Gloucestershire YOT is aware, however, that meeting standards, key performance indicators and targets is not the only way to measure the effectiveness of the YOT's work. The views of young people and their parents or carers can provide another important perspective on the quality and impact of its work.

## **1.3. Gathering feedback**

Currently, YOTs can use Viewpoint On-Line Questionnaires to get feedback on the quality and impact of their work. There are two of these: one to elicit young people's views about their panel meeting and contract; and one to elicit their views on the YOT generally. Both questionnaires have over 40 questions, the majority of which are multiple choice. Return rates are not particularly high. South Gloucestershire YOT has also devised a short written questionnaire for young people which covers one side of A4: most questions are open-ended. Again, return rates are not high.

## **1.4. Independent evaluation**

In March 2006 South Gloucestershire YOT decided to commission an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of their work, which would take an in-depth look at the experiences of young people and their parents or carers in their dealings with the YOT. What had their experience been like, and how could it have been better? The evaluation was undertaken by Rowan Associates and Lin Whitfield Consultancy, and took place between April 2006 and March 2007.

## **1.5. Structure of this report**

The rest of this report is in three sections. Section 2 discusses the aims, objectives and methodology for the evaluation. Section 3 details the findings, while section 4 discusses these and makes a number of recommendations.

## SECTION 2 – AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Aims and objectives

The main aim of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the work of South Gloucestershire YOT through investigating the experiences of young people and their parents or carers in their dealings with the YOT. Effectiveness is a wide-ranging term. Following an initial period of familiarisation and desk research, and discussions with members of the YOT, it was decided to focus on four broad dimensions of effectiveness:

1. The extent to which clients **understand** what's going on.
2. The extent to which clients feel **involved and included** in what's going on.
3. The extent to which the YOT's work takes account of clients' whole lives i.e. is **holistic and realistic**. Did the intervention take into account the situation/circumstances/perspective of the young person and their family? Did the intervention take into account practical issues for the young person and their family e.g. timing, venue? Did the intervention work on underlying problems/issues for the young person and their family?
4. The **outcomes and changes** for clients as a result of the YOT's work. Did the intervention result in behavioural change for the young person and their family? Did the intervention change how the young person and their family see the future?

### 2.2. Stages in the Youth Justice system

This report considers YOT clients' mandatory involvement with the Youth Justice system covered by three stages:

- The court process
- The panel meeting
- The intervention programme

There are also voluntary arrangements at the pre-court stages. Only one of the people interviewed for this evaluation was involved with the YOT on a voluntary basis. The input of both this young person and parent is discussed in the section on the intervention programme.

It is clear that for young people and their families the beginning of the court process marks a major stepping stone or way marker along the path of their involvement with the Youth Justice system. Experiences for young people and families during the court process will have an impact on the subsequent work with the YOT. It was therefore decided not to exclude the court process from the evaluation.

## **2.3. Methodology**

**2.3.1.** The YOT works with around 180 young people over the course of a year, all of whom are at one of a number of stages in the Youth Justice system. In order to identify a robust enough sample for meaningful conclusions to be made, it was initially decided to focus on the cohort coming through in June regardless of the work the YOT would be undertaking with them. The intention was to conduct a series of longitudinal semi-structured interviews with young people and with parents or carers: one very soon after the young people started their work with the YOT, and one towards (or after) the end of their time with the YOT. Participation was to be voluntary, but an incentive of a £10 voucher per interview was offered in the hope that 18 young people and their parents or carers would agree to take part.

**2.3.2.** After developing frameworks for the interviews, these were piloted with three young people and three families. Clients for these pilot interviews were identified by YOT staff for their likely co-operation and participation, so that the draft interview frameworks could be properly tested. Because the focus was the work of the YOT rather than the young people and their offences, the original intention was to conduct the interviews with no information about the offences the young people had committed. The first pilot interview demonstrated that this created difficulties in the interview process, and that it was necessary to have some information about the young people, the offence, the intervention programme, and a small amount of information on the family background. Once this problem was overcome, the pilot interviews were successful and informative.

**2.3.3.** Setting up the interviews proved to be more problematic than anticipated. YOT staff wrote to all young people and families who began work with them during June, but only two of them volunteered to participate. By the end of August, it was clear that there was a need to reappraise some of the detail of the methodology.

Following a discussion with a Senior Caseworker, it became clearer why seeking to interview young people early on in their intervention programme was proving difficult. Firstly, many young people coming into contact with the YOT for the first time are unlikely to be prepared to talk to someone else about their experience – nor are they likely to have much experience to talk about. Also, YOT staff do not at this early stage have established relationships which enable them to promote involvement with something external like an evaluation. At this point they are rightly concerned with establishing a working relationship with the young person.

**2.3.4.** It was therefore decided to shift the emphasis onto young people with whom the YOT had an established relationship: it was felt that the longitudinal aspect would come from the length of their relationship with the YOT. This change of approach increased the numbers who volunteered to take part, but it was a slow process.

**2.3.5.** With hindsight, these methodology problems might have been anticipated, but the concern at the outset was to get as representative a sample as possible and then build in a longitudinal aspect. The eventual extended timescale for the interviews was not ideal. With a more intensive schedule, an evaluator identifies themes more readily and the process of 'linking and thinking' is easier.

**2.3.6.** 32 interviews were undertaken over the period from the end of August 2006 until the beginning of February 2007. 16 were with young people, and 16 with parents, not all of them from the same families. The breakdown of the sample of young people is as follows:

**Gender of young people interviewed:**

Male	Female
11	5

**Ages of young people interviewed:**

Age	No. interviewed
17 years	10
16 years	1
15 years	4
12 years	1

**Areas of residence of young people and/or parents interviewed:**

Area of residence	No. interviewed
Bradley Stoke	1
Easter Compton	1
Filton	1
Kingswood	4
Mangotsfield	1
Patchway	1
Thornbury	1
Yate	3
Bath (Fostered)	1
Bristol B&B	2

**Orders for young people interviewed:**

Order	Contact with YOT
8 month DTO Post Custody Licence with ISSP + ASBO	Extensive
Supervision Order with ISSP + Bail ISSP	Extensive
Bail ISSP	New
Supervision Order (6 months) with ISSP + Action Plan Order	Previous
Action Plan Order	Extensive
Supervision Order (18 months) + Reparations Order	Extensive
Supervision Order(1 Year) + 3 month Curfew Order	Extensive
Supervision Order with Conditions	New
Referral Order (9 months)	New
Referral Order (9 months)	New
Referral Order (7 months)	New
Referral Order (6 months)	New
Referral Order (6 months)	New
Referral Order (4 months)	New
Referral Order (3 months)	New
Final Warning	New

**2.3.7.** We used a technique for analysing the interview data based on “discourse analysis”. This is a way of analysing the language used by interviewees, to explore the meaning of, and basic assumptions in, the data. It enables the interviewer to make the assumptions in the interviews explicit, and this adds significantly to their meaning.

## SECTION 3 – FINDINGS

### 3.1. Introduction

In this section, we analyse the work of South Gloucestershire YOT, based on up to the three stages of clients' (young people and their families) involvement, from the court, through the panel, and with the intervention programme. We consider each of the dimensions of effectiveness:

- Understanding
- Involved and included
- Holistic and realistic
- Outcomes and changes

as they relate to each stage of the Youth Justice/YOT process.

### 3.2. Stage 1 – The court process

For the young people and their parents or carers, the court process marks a major way marker along the path of their involvement with the Youth Justice system.

Parents, more than young people, discussed the impact of, and their responses to, the court process.

Young people's responses generally depended on their history of offending.

Therefore in this section we will refer to young people as:

- Those attending court for the first time
- Those with previous offences, typically with one or perhaps two previous (often minor) offences
- Persistent young offenders (PYO's)

It is important to note that all the parents who were interviewed felt that their child deserved to go to court and to be punished for what they had done.

We measure experiences of the court system against the four dimensions of effectiveness outlined above in section 2.1.

#### 3.2.1. Understanding

This dimension considers the extent to which young people and their families understood what was going on when they went to court. There was a difference in the responses between young people who had been in court before, and those who had not. Young people describing their first experience of court reflected a real lack of understanding of the process and system. One said that, when her case was finally heard after a number of adjournments, it was very quick, and she did not know what was going on:

*"Then it was all over, and I thought... what just happened?"*

Another said he had expected to be in a more formal setting, with a dock:

*"I thought I'd be in a little box on my own... not just sat round a table..."*

Young people who had previous offences, particularly PYO's, described the whole process (and in particular, the waiting: see below) as being quite a social event:

*"You just sit round in the waiting room and know everyone"*

or

*"...see all your mates."*

12 of the parents interviewed had attended court with their son or daughter. It was clear from their comments that many of those attending for the first time had found this difficult from an emotional point of view. It was described as *"distressing"*, *"scary"*, and *"the longest morning of my life"*. Given this starting point, it seems paramount that clear explanations are given so that people understand what is happening, and that the process should run smoothly and to time. However, this was the exception rather than the rule for all but two parents.

Five parents felt that they had understood what was going on at court for most or all of the time. Two of these had found out by asking professionals in the system before the court appearance.

*"My son had already been working with the YOT so his YOT Worker told me what to expect. I understood the reasoning behind what was going on. He put my mind at rest."*

For those who arrived at court unprepared, it seemed largely a matter of luck as to whether they were given any explanation of what would happen.

*"I dropped my 17 year-old off, not expecting to have to stay, but the registrar told me I needed to."*

*"I was totally unprepared – thrown in at the deep end. The solicitor only got there two minutes before we went in."*

*"The solicitor explained the process but he didn't tell us we were allowed to speak."*

*"There were four adjournments but no-one gave us any explanation. It was horrendous."*

### **3.2.2. Involved and included**

Given many parents' or carers' emotional state and the frequent lack of understanding of what to expect, it is unsurprising that over half the parents did not feel involved and included at court. Comments included: *"it was all very alien"* and *"I felt awkward"*. One parent commented:

*"We were only in there for two minutes, and there was no conversation."*

Another parent commented:

*"I thought I was going in order to give parental backing, but they asked me two questions which seemed to imply the offence was partly my fault as I'd stopped his pocket money."*

This lack of inclusion was shared by many of the young people from all three groups: those attending court for the first time, those with one or two previous offenders, and persistent young offenders. One first offender commented that the court staff (in which he included everyone from the clerk to the solicitors to the magistrates) “*may as well have been chatting Chinese*” for all he understood them. Another said that no-one talked to him and no-one asked him any questions throughout his hearing. The PYO’s, however, were most vociferous about their sense of exclusion and alienation from the court process. For example:

*“It’s as though they just go on having their own little slagging matches... talking above my head...”* (about his solicitor and the prosecuting solicitor)

*“They only listen to what you have to say if you plead guilty... otherwise it’s just a process.”*

Another, describing what he experienced as rudeness on the part of the magistrates, said:

*“they have no right to talk to you like that... if they were more polite, they’d get more out of [young people].... “*

Analysis of the interview data showed that communication is a critical issue that underpins the effectiveness of the YOT, and enables (or impedes) change. The poor quality of communication experienced at court means that an opportunity is lost for young people at an early, and potentially powerful, stage within the youth justice system.

### **3.2.3. Holistic and realistic**

The main criticism, however, from ten of the 12 parents or carers interviewed who attended court concerned the length of time they were kept waiting before they went into court. This varied between 1.5 and 7 hours. All the young people who went to court discussed the amount of “waiting around” involved with the court process. Several also spoke of the number of adjournments they had experienced, and the time that sometimes elapsed between the offence and the sentence.

*“It took me three buses to get there for nine o’clock, and we didn’t go in until after four.”* (parent)

*“We had to wait three or four hours, and then it was adjourned anyway.”* (parent)

Expecting people to wait for this length of time does not seem to take account of clients’ whole lives:

*“I had a big argument with them as I had to wait so long. You can’t wait ages if you’ve got young children with you – they need to take things like this into account.”* (parent)

*“I had no transport but there was an expectation that he'd get there somehow – he was just 16, very immature and with ADHD.”* (parent)

*“Each time... my mum had to take a day off work, and I had to have the day off school... I'm doing GCSE's this year....”* (young person – first offence)

Three parents described the whole process as a shambles because of a number of adjournments:

*“They lost evidence, they mixed things up, they sent the wrong videotape – you lose respect for the legal system and the police. Altogether there were five adjournments.”*

The impact of the process is undermined by all this. One young person said that his sentence came two years after the offence, by which time it no longer had a great deal of relevance.

### **3.2.4. Outcomes and changes**

One of the dimensions of effectiveness we have used in this evaluation is whether (or not) the processes of the Youth Justice system enable changes that help young people to stop offending (or change their offending behaviour). It is clear that the inefficiencies and lengthiness of the court system and process undermine its impact. Interviewees expressed a range of views about its impact. Some parents found it intimidating, and commented on the impact they thought the court process might have on young people:

*“It's quite intimidating but there's a good reason for this!”*

However, several young people found it too informal to make much of a difference:

*“If it was more formal, it would have been different...”* (first offence)

*“[youth court... ] is just some people sitting around in a room”* (PYO)

The PYO cohort described Youth Court as “a process...” or as being

*“just there... part of my life as a persistent offender.”*

For those who said the court experience influenced their offending behaviour, this was because of the “hassle”. One young person (first offence) left court thinking

*“never again... but that was cos of the time it took and I didn't like waiting... not cos of the offence.”*

For parents also, the waiting time and the length of the process was what had impact, although too often, the impact was negative:

*“The whole process is very long-winded – it took ages for it to get to court. It would have more impact on young people if things happened sooner – not so long after the offence.”*

*“The first time we went it definitely had an impact on him... After you’ve been back three or four times because of adjournments, the young people seem to lose that – some were just having a laugh and chatting with their mates.”*

### **3.2.5. Communication**

We found that of the young people interviewed who attended court after their first offence, the first contact with the YOT came at court, after sentencing. All the parents who attended said that the YOT Duty Worker had explained clearly what would happen next, though one commented:

*“She explained it but you forget things when you’re distressed.”*

Effective communication relies on a range of methods to convey information, if that information is to be understood and taken on board. Only 7% of the meaning attributed to communication is in the spoken word. Families who are experiencing the youth justice system for the first time would value some clear, accessible and appropriate written information from the point their child is charged, to support them during their initial contact with YOT staff at Court.

### **3.3. Stage 2 – the panel meeting**

Referral panels were set up in 2002 for young offenders who plead guilty and are convicted for the first time. Each panel consists of two volunteers from the local community and one member of the YOT acting as adviser. The panel meets with the young person, his or her family and wherever possible those harmed by the crime to draw up a contract. This sets out the work that each young person has to do. The interviewees experienced the panel as a less significant part of the Youth Justice system. In this section, then, we consider the dimensions of effectiveness together.

For young people, the panel was discussed as another part of the bureaucracy – the system: it is something they *have* to do, but which has little influence on their behaviour. Panel meetings were described as being a pointless exercise, and *“not up to much”*:

*“They just ask you your name.”*

One young person felt the panel members *“looked down on me”* and this made her feel uncomfortable. The only benefit was that *“it was so short... and at least it was local.”* Another described it as very uncomfortable:

*“It was horrible...they asked lots of stupid questions.... [The review panel] meeting lasted 5 minutes .....if they knew I was doing well, why call me back at all?”*

Another said simply:

*“Well, it was OK, but I really don’t like meetings.”*

Only one young person had anything positive to say about the panel. He found it more accessible than court. Because the panel is a less formal setting, it was easier to talk and to understand what would happen next.

However, the panel seemed to be a more helpful process for parents, who were able to gather information about the Youth Justice system, about the work of the YOT, and about their child's progress. Four parents or carers either did not attend, or could not remember attending, a panel meeting. Of the remaining ten, all had felt welcomed and had understood what was going on. Eight had found it a positive experience:

*"I thought it might be like court but it was more relaxed. They laid out the rules and processes etc, and spent time going over what happened. They asked me about how I felt, and then asked my son for his comments. They seemed to understand his point of view."*

*"They understood – non-judgemental. I didn't feel intimidated."*

One parent, however, did not feel that her views were taken into account as the panel did not ask her for them. Another parent commented:

*"I didn't know what would happen. I expected them to listen more but they just tell you what's going to happen and you agree the terms."*

### **3.4. Stage 3 – the intervention programme**

This section looks at the dimensions of effectiveness of YOT work, in relation to "case work". Most of the data is derived from the interviews with young people, with additional data from the interviews with parents and carers. We discuss all of the dimensions of effectiveness.

Young people interviewed divided into two groups: those for whom this offence was their first contact with the YOT; and those who had previous involvement. We only use this distinction when it adds meaning to the text.

All parents were pleased and grateful about the support and work of the YOT with their child. Although the service is compulsory, none of them expressed the view that they would rather not be working with the YOT if there was a choice.

#### **3.4.1. Understanding**

This dimension considers the extent to which young people and their families were:

- clear about the role of the YOT, and
- given information they understood

#### **First contact:**

None of the young people with no previous contact with the YOT knew what its role was. While some reflected that they did not want to have any involvement with the process, all found that the YOT worker at first contact did explain their role.

**Previous contact:**

Young people who had previous contacts with the YOT felt that they understood the role. It was noticeable within this group, however, that more information about the criminal justice system in general, as well as the YOT specifically, was from their peers.

**Involvement of parents:**

All but one of the parents or carers felt that the assessment report process was positive and constructive, and that the questions were not unduly intrusive:

*“She explained really well about why she needed the information and what would be done with it.”*

One parent, however, felt that there were a lot of questions and that it hadn't been explained to her why all this information was needed.

When the YOT staff begin working with the young people, parents and carers have less involvement, particularly those of over 17 year olds. All parents and carers had received a copy of the intervention programme and understood the content. They reported that there is good contact between YOT staff and parents and carers when work begins, and as a working relationship is being built: indeed, it was clear from some of the interviews that YOT staff look holistically at the family situation and provide a considerable degree of support for parents. Parents and carers at this stage feel able to ask questions and build their understanding, but as time goes on there is less contact:

*“Last year I had a lot to do with them, but I hardly ever see them now – they just come and talk to my son.”* (parent of PYO under 17)

With the focus of YOT staff primarily on the young people, there is a danger that parents and carers who see themselves as more peripheral to the YOT's work will be less likely to contact the YOT about things they do not quite remember or do not fully understand.

*“My son's YOT worker puts things in writing for me, and I put that on the fridge door. I'm lucky – previous YOT workers haven't always done that. Information doesn't always sink in.”* (parent of PYO under 17)

**Information:**

In general, young people have found the written information they have received from YOT staff to be clear, accessible and specific. Many young people, however, said that they tend not to read “the leaflets” they are given.

All of the young people interviewed said that they appreciated YOT staff giving them accurate, clear and honest information, for example about drugs, about the options and choices which could enable them to make changes, and about crime. One young person (male) echoed the views of others when he described YOT staff as being

*“like teachers about crime – they know everything about crime”*

including the consequences of different actions, and that has a useful deterrent aspect.

When asked if there was anything the YOT could have done better, a number of parents said that they should explain more, but their comments were about the issue of communication and keeping in touch rather than about understanding.

Young people seem to benefit from the whole package of information they are given by the different members of the YOT team, for example some dealing with health issues, some with drugs and some with offending behaviour.

All but one of the young people who had committed vehicle offences commented on the effectiveness of the Impact Road Show, which brought home in a very powerful way the consequences of their actions. For some, the images acted as a simple, but seemingly welcome, shock tactic to make them decide not to commit that offence again.

### **3.4.2. Involved and included**

This dimension considers whether YOT work is centred on young people and their families, and on the extent to which they feel they are active participants in the YOT programme or whether they feel they are being “done to”.

All of the young people interviewed felt that they were involved and included in the programme:

*“it’s all about me”*

was expressed by several of them. This was not the case for all of the parents.

It was clear from the content of the interviews with parents or carers that five of them felt involved and included in the work the YOT was doing with the young people. Comments included:

*“He’s brilliant – I can ring and talk to him at any time.”* (parent of 17 year old)

*“She’s fantastic – rings and keeps me in touch.”* (parent of 17 year old)

*“She sees us for a few minutes at the end of the session.”* (parents of under 17 year old)

*“They take a ‘let’s help sort this out’ approach.”* (parent of under 17 year old)

In three of the interviews with parents and carers there was no evidence to confirm that they felt involved and included or that they did not. The other six parents had much to say that was positive, but all had issues about communication – or rather, the lack of it. Three were parents of under 17 year olds, and wanted feedback on how their sons or daughters were doing, as they are accustomed to getting from school staff.

*“I’d like some sort of feedback about the issues they’re working on with her – not necessarily everything, but something.”*

*“I recognise that meetings are confidential, but I’ve had little information on how they feel she’s doing... just an informal chat to discuss progress.”*

*“When kids get in trouble, the parents should be worked with and talked to too – I hardly ever see his YOT worker now. They should involve the parents a lot more – some of us want to know how we can help.”*

This last point is echoed by two parents of over 17 year olds:

*“We’d like feedback from the YOT – he just grunts – so we could help, and also not get things wrong when he gets angry.”*

*“I feel I’m doing my best to keep him on track, but without information – he doesn’t tell me. I’d prefer to have information so I can make a choice about whether I push him or not.”*

Another parent of an over 17 year old commented on the way communication changes once the young person becomes 17, as if maturity happens overnight:

*“[When they reach 17] the police say the parent doesn’t need to be there but the YOT does. It causes a lot of confusion... they’re trying to treat them as adults but parents are blamed if the child doesn’t turn up. I feel I don’t know the whole story... letters come to him but we’re not told – he doesn’t tell us anything.”*

Two parents also mentioned paperwork which had not arrived, including a copy of the report for the second panel meeting.

### **3.4.3. Effective communication**

The interview data identified communication as a critical theme which we will discuss in some depth. It was clear that the quality and nature of communication between YOT staff and young people and their parents is an underpinning factor which enables young people to feel involved in a process of change.

Analysis of the interview data, particularly with young people found that the factors supporting, enhancing or inhibiting good communication between staff and young people is perhaps the most important factor influencing the effectiveness of YOT interventions. It was clear that young people are concerned not only with what is said, but also with the way it is said. Good communication enables YOT staff to develop effective relationships, and this is the basis on which they either do, or do not, pass on the messages underpinning YOT programmes.

We have identified several factors which contribute to effective communication between YOT staff and young people. These are:

- Trust
- Paying attention
- Not judging
- Respect

Humour was also highlighted by some young people. Most also spoke of the importance of feeling that their YOT worker was “on their side”.

### **Factors contributing to establishing trust:**

Most of the young people who described the positive elements of the relationship with their YOT workers spoke of trust. This is a product of different factors, such as YOT staff

- “speaking it like it is”, being honest even about difficult issues
- managing boundaries well
- giving information clearly, openly and honestly, including about the consequences of actions
- giving clear and constructive feedback.

### **Paying attention:**

It was clear from several of the interviews that simply being listened to, and being able to talk, contributed positively to many young people’s situations. One young person (male) said that the best thing about his YOT worker was that:

*“he listens to me, and he’s on my side”.*

Another (female) described her YOT workers as being

*“easy to talk to... a person to chat to, that’s open... so I can get stuff off my chest”*

Where the relationship with YOT staff is not very positive, this was sometimes expressed as being:

*“because I think he’s just trying too hard”*

or is

*“not really paying attention”*

Parents and carers also made many positive comments about the YOT staff and their communication skills. Most of the YOT staff made an instant impression when they first met parents and carers to carry out the assessment report process. Three parents commented particularly on the empathy they showed:

*“She understood how we felt – the shock and everything. It felt like she was on our side.”*

Seven parents or carers commented on how approachable YOT staff are:

*“He’s very easy to talk to – if there’s anything I need to discuss, I get hold of him.”*

*“Early on when I was a wreck, she’d sit and chat – that was great.”*

*“He’s really understanding – a lovely bloke.”*

For many young people, the capacity for open, honest communication enables young people to express their concerns and vulnerabilities. This gives them a rare and valuable opportunity for expression and reflection. We discuss how this enables change in the Discussion section of this report [invisible enabling: 4.8]

### **Non-judgemental attitudes:**

However, an additional layer adding to effective practice was the feeling, expressed by all of the young people with positive relationships with YOT staff, that, while *“they make you realise you’ve done wrong”*, they don’t judge young people for their previous actions. In the words of one young person (female), they want to know why, but:

*“they’re not preachy or teachy”*

Other young people spoke of their YOT workers as being

*“definitely on your side, even though their role is to punish you”* (male), or as being:

*“always enthusiastic about how I was doing”* (female)

An interesting, and commonly expressed, phrase about YOT staff’s attitudes towards young people was that they *“treat me like a normal person”* (male); or that *“seem normal to me”* (female). Behind this is a view that YOT staff are not forbidding or overly professional, in a way that creates barriers between themselves and the people they work with. Another element of this description is that, in treating young people as ‘normal’, they *“speak like I want to be spoken to”* and respond to each person as a whole person, with an identity beyond that of a young offender, or as *“not just trouble”*. Evidence of this came through with comments about being able to “chat about other stuff”: about young people’s interests and aspirations, beyond the YOT programme.

### **Respect:**

This non-judgemental approach contributes to the development of respect in the relationships between staff and young people, which young people talked about as an essential element in their relationships with YOT staff – and with the world in general. For some, it was clear that *not* being treated with respect was a factor influencing their offending behaviour: comments about being disrespected by peers were often expressed when discussing offending behaviour. Or, as one young male put it:

*“you speak to me like s\*\*t, I speak to you like s\*\*t”*

On the other hand, the views of most of the interviewees were summed up by the comment from a young male that they will listen to people who:

*“just show me respect, or are not rude to me.”*

YOT staff were described as having much more positive approaches to young people, as being *“sound... on the level”* and as treating young people with respect.

The attitudes of YOT staff, and their ability to communicate these attitudes to young people, as well as their ability to communicate *with* young people, supports the practical work of the YOT. Analysis of the interview data highlighted that young people felt that YOT staff simply accepted them, and trusted them to change. This approach underpins the positive impact of the work carried out by the YOT.

### **Negative factors:**

Factors undermining the relationship between young people or their families and YOT staff are primarily associated with poor communication, and a sense that YOT staff *“were not really interested in me”*. For young people, the most common factor

undermining YOT input, for young people was inconsistencies on the part of YOT staff. Mainly this was associated with

- lateness: YOT staff arriving late for appointments
- changing appointment times without sufficient notice
- not delivering what was offered.

For parents, it was feeling patronised on occasion:

*“He went on about how he liked [a] strict [approach]... I get the impression he thinks I’m a bit lax with him.”*

*“She laid down ‘rules’ and said we had to follow them – she didn’t seem to feel things should be adapted to the needs of the child... [When I said I couldn’t attend] a parenting group because the timing wasn’t convenient, she made a crack about priorities.”*

#### **3.4.4. Holistic and realistic**

The issues/dimensions that emerge from the data concern whether, or not, the elements of the programme

- effectively addressed the perceived needs of each young person
- were realistic in the way they addressed these needs
- responded flexibly to both young people’s needs, and other issues/circumstances/demands in their lives

#### **Addressing needs:**

Interviews with young people identified a number of ways in which YOT staff, and the YOT programme enabled young people to address the needs which influence their offending behaviour, which *“help you to get there”* (young male).

#### **A realistic programme?**

Although some young people did not relate to the idea that they were following a programme, most saw the work they were doing as both appropriate and useful. Programmes were described as picking out themes that needed addressing in their lives: issues that may have been directly relevant to the offending, or that contributed to difficulties in their lives and consequently had an indirect relationship to their offending. It helps to

*“get you on the right tracks”.*

Several young people described how work on anger management brought about positive changes in their responses to difficult situations: to their relationships with family, friends, or at school:

*“Before, if I lost my temper, I would go and punch something. Now, I have more self control, and I just walk away.”*

Some described how work on peer group pressure enabled them to make positive decisions about changing their friendship circles, or to be more assertive with their friends. (See also 3.4.5. Outcomes). Thus, by addressing the social issues which influence offending, YOT interventions were seen to be realistic by the young people.

Several of the young people interviewed discussed the ways in which their work with

the YOT gave them “*practical tips*”, and tools which help young people and parents to communicate better and reach compromises which made home life much better. Some of the interviewees discussed the ways in which YOT staff enabled them to develop better thinking skills:

*“It makes you think... Some of the work is hard, but that’s all a part of the whole thing.”*

This comment was notable in capturing a rarely expressed, but often present, understanding that working with the YOT challenges young people to look differently at their behaviours. Also notable was the degree of “buy-in” or co-operation achieved within the YOT programmes. One young person (male) with a long history of offending, commenting that a lot of his programme is:

*“...common sense, and I agree with it. If I wasn’t into it, it would just be LONG”* [boring/tedious]

and would not be effective.

### **Practical approaches:**

In part, this co-operation is achieved through a series of practical measures, including arranging appointments at times and in venues that suit each young person, such as at home, or, in one case, at college during the dinner hour (for a young person on an apprenticeship). Where meeting at home is difficult, YOT staff will take young people out. Sometimes this involves being taken out for food:

*“anywhere you want, as long as they can get a receipt”*

which builds confidence and trust.

The multi-agency work of YOT staff is another element, particularly with Connexions. Several young people told us that the YOT had arranged for them to have a Connexions Adviser, who was helping with finding work, or going back to college. (See 3.4.5. Outcomes: the importance of wanting a job to enable change). Some of this group said they had tried to seek Connexions help and had not been able to arrange it; or had been de-motivated by their educational experiences to seek this help.

South Gloucestershire YOT’s multi-agency approach includes bringing in the resources of Elevations (an independent youth work organisation) for young people on ISSP. This was described as being a very positive element of the programme that offers a wide ranging and creative programme. As with the YOT, Elevations staff were described as friendly and non-judgemental, and as understanding young people’s points of view.

Parents and carers were overwhelmingly positive about the programmes that the young people were following and the work that YOT staff were doing. They were also very appreciative.

*“She’s very thoughtful about meetings – rings my daughter on her mobile to see how she’s doing and to remind her.”*

*“The YOT have been much better than Social Services, and I’ve told them so!”*

*"I like to get her [YOT worker's] views on things – she looks for answers for him [son]... she continues to be a rock while various things are catching up with him."*

### **Lack of flexibility:**

There were, however, a number of instances which young people described where the programme offered little flexibility, and this impeded the effectiveness of the YOT's work. They are:

- "The forms"
- Inflexible timetables, which do not take account of other needs and issues

As a mainly compulsory service with significant emphasis on enforcement, the YOT is of course limited in how much flexibility it can offer young people and their families.

### **"The forms":**

Several young people talked about "the forms", stating, for example that

*"all we do is sit around and fill in these forms."*

The connections between the content of the 'forms' and their offending behaviour was not always apparent. There was sense that the forms themselves are really quite boring, so if they just gave the "right answer", their session would end more quickly. One young person (female) said that she had problems reading, and that created an instant barrier to "the forms". Another (female) acknowledged that she had a lot of anger inside her, and the forms did nothing about this. She would have preferred physical activity (such as boxing) to *"let the anger out"*. For these young people, the paper-based process of their programme appeared to be very inflexible, and not tailored to their needs, and was less effective as a result.

### **Inflexible timetables:**

Two young people, both on ISSP, talked about having time-tables changed, which meant that they were unable to continue with some valued activities. An underlying issue is a lack of flexibility of approach, and a sense of not being listened to and taken into account. One example concerned having had a community service placement that gave the young person a sense of worth, and an interest in developing a skills base. He became a volunteer at the project, but his programme then changed and he was unable to continue his volunteering.

A small number of parents also commented on the lack of flexibility on timetables, and, in some instances, on a lack of clear communication between agencies:

*"He works, so it's difficult to fit in times for his community service. Letters come with no time to get into contact and rearrange. The system seems to be based around young people who aren't at work."*

*"We've had clashes between [times for] Connexions and his reparations."*

*"She's doing anger management, but Education Welfare were going to do it in school and didn't want it to conflict. The YOT said it wasn't anything to do with EW."*

These issues were described as getting in the way of the positive impact of YOT work.

### 3.4.5. Outcomes

This dimension considers what has changed as a result of YOT intervention. Data from the young people's interviews identified two aspects of change for young people:

- practical and emotional elements of the programme, or the input from YOT staff, that young people identified as helpful. We sum this up as the impact of the programme
- changes the young people chose, or wished, to make themselves, and how the YOT supported, enabled, or inhibited those choices.

#### **Impact of the programme – external factors:**

Interviewees identified a range of impacts of their work with the YOT. They were able to receive and act on the information they were given. Drug information was seen as particularly helpful in this respect. The Impact Road Show also had a positive impact on all but one of the people for whom it was a part of their programme:

*"It made me realise what **might** happen, and made me think 'what's the point'" [of stealing cars].*

As discussed above, elements of the programme, such as anger management, were seen to have enabled real changes for young people.

Ten of the parents or carers talked about the positive changes they were noticing as the young people were going through their programme. Of the remaining four, three young people were at the beginning of their programme so it was really too early to say, and the other interviewee was a new foster carer where, again, it was too early to form a view. Some of the outcomes for young people appear to be quite dramatic:

*"She's stopped using drugs, and seems to have persuaded her boyfriend to do so as well."*

*"He's stopped thieving, and hasn't been in trouble since, apart from a bit of fighting at school."*

*"He's more aware of the dangers of alcohol, and is saving hard."*

Work with the YOT, then, has enabled most of the young people interviewed to become aware of the consequences of their past actions, and to make more positive choices about their actions in the future.

Underpinning this are valuable lessons about how to communicate more constructively with people, based on respect. It was clear from the interviews with young people that this message is given by YOT staff modelling an approach based on respect. The lesson can be subtle, as is evidenced by the following part of one of the interviews with a young person (female):

*"Nothing they have ever said or done has helped me... because you can only change yourself, if you want to do it yourself ....But... if you treat people with respect, they'll treat you with respect back ... I learnt that from the YOT... and*

*I am [more respectful, especially of her mum]... so the YOT has helped me to see more sense... so, yeah, there have been some useful lessons".*

A number of parents noted signs, sometimes quite small, of behavioural change which were resulting in more respectful relationships:

*"He's more loving and polite. He's nicer to me, and it feels good."*

*"She thinks things through more...explains why she's upset. And she's better behaved at school."*

Three parents noted that their son or daughter was becoming more responsible:

*"He takes responsibility for his YOT appointments now... sits down afterwards and tells me what's happened with his YOT worker."*

Five parents could see some impact of the anger management work, while acknowledging that there was still some way to go:

*"He has marginally less bad tantrums I suppose – he doesn't punch the wall now."*

*"He doesn't shout or kick me any more."*

*"She's calmed right down, though she still has her moments. The main change is that there's no more physical fighting with me."*

*"Maybe she doesn't 'go off on one' so much now."*

With these changes for young people, there is often a knock-on impact on other family members. A number of parents are clearly benefiting from their son or daughter's improved anger management, as noted above. One parent has been able to come off Valium and is feeling much calmer, and one is now accessing treatment for depression. Two parents commented:

*"I've backed off a bit now – I'm more relaxed... less stressed. We have fewer arguments."*

*"It's easier now on me. He'd stay out all night, and there'd be lots of arguments."*

Four parents commented that things are also getting easier for siblings and general family life:

*"He doesn't go into the younger one's room and shout – he [younger sibling] used to get tearful when that happened."*

*"She's calmer with her brother, and her attitude to him has changed... they spend more time together."*

By listening, not judging, and allowing young people to feel they have worked things out for themselves, the YOT enables young people to **think differently**, and to learn from the work. This is particularly significant with young people whose experience of the education system is poor. A young male interviewee simply said that, after working with the YOT:

*"I think better"*

A young female said that, although it was difficult:

*"I'll learn from it – it'll pay off in the end"*

And a male interviewee summed up the impact of the programme in these words:

*"... well, it gives an outside perspective. They are not family, not the police... just these weird people who want to help.... This [programme] is about breaking you down, evaluating and assessing every bit about you, and then putting you back together differently."*

### **Choosing to change:**

It was clear from the interviews that, while the YOT interventions enable some young people to "think differently", YOT work is most effective when young people themselves choose to change. Arguably, it is the YOT intervention that prompts, and enables, this choice. But it was noticeable that the most strenuously asserted "choices" were made by young people themselves. While they often valued YOT staff support in putting their changes into effect, and keeping their resolve, the impact of a range of both internal and external factors were also discussed. These include:

- fear and shock: such as that caused by getting arrested, or a period on remand
- finding life is easier when they get in less trouble (e.g. at school)
- having better relationships with family, and so an easier home life
- starting new relationships – for young male interviewees, getting a girlfriend was a frequently cited change factor.

For some young people, particularly the older interviewees and those who had longer histories of offending, the motivating factor was that they wanted to grow up:

*"It's my choice to stop offending... [because] I've just grown up a bit... not because of all this YOT palaver. I just want to get a job, and get a girlfriend, and make something of my life now."*

or:

*"It [offending] just don't appeal to me anymore, and I want to grow up and get a job. It's not cos of the YOT" [Young woman]*

or:

*[Offending]... "was something to do when I was younger. But I got bored, so am stopping. After this lot, I won't be offending again, cos I've got this order, and it ain't worth it. I've done so much [that I'd be in prison after this]... and it's got boring... And mum would be happy then. And I want a job" [young man]*

For some of the older young people interviewed, a decision to stop offending was associated with greater independence: with being able to get a job, and then to move out of their family home.

Some parents also acknowledged that the timeframe for change was relatively lengthy in developmental terms and that 'growing up a bit' was a factor contributing to the changes they were noticing:

*"No, [I didn't notice any changes] at first, he was too immature. Now he's more mature he's willing to spend time with his family not his mates. His whole life was his mates, but now he'll sit with me and we'll watch TV."*

For some young people, a decision to stop offending was motivated by their understanding of the system. They knew that they would be sent down, or (for the older cohort) that they would find themselves in the adult criminal justice system. All the young people with lengthy experience of the criminal justice system expressed an awareness of the differences between youth and adult justice. This stance was best summed up thus:

*"Once you're 18, you go to man's prison... and then you're stuck with it [offending behaviour] for the rest of your life... [because when you leave, there's no support]... you get chucked out [of prison] and just have to make your own way... so you end up offending again and back inside"*

In this context, choosing not to offend, while seen as a personal choice, is also a product of YOT information, and YOT support.

### **Remorse as a change factor:**

It was striking, in the interviews with young people, that a final change factor was the personal response of each young person to their own offence. Some young people felt no remorse about their actions. This was most forcefully expressed thus:

*"I don't mind if I stop offending or if I don't... They can't change me so they might as well stop trying"*

However, a large number of those interviewed *"already felt bad about it"* and here, and with them, YOT interventions enabled them to make changes, such as to their peer group, that would enable changes to their offending. One young male said that what helped him was

*"being supported through it all"*

and being given information. For others in this group, YOT interventions have also helped them to maintain the changes.

## SECTION 4 – DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1. Introduction

YOTs are expected to apply finite resources to an infinite (and certainly unknown) level of need. In this section, we discuss and analyse the ways in which South Gloucestershire YOT meets this challenge. The discussion will follow the stages of involvement with the Youth Justice system:

- Court
- Panel
- Intervention programme

We will highlight the major emerging issues as they relate to each of the dimensions of effectiveness which we have used throughout this work.

### 4.2. Court

The evaluation has highlighted a number of issues about the court experience. We note that these are beyond the scope of the YOT, whose staff find themselves picking up the pieces of a system described by their client group as inefficient, chaotic, bureaucratic, and alienating.

Young people and their parents and carers discussed their frustration and anger about the length of the waits, the number of adjournments, and the loss of paperwork or other evidence. They typically found that when they actually got inside the court, the experience was alien and excluding, with conversations taking place between professionals and not with young people and their parents/carers. Unlike YOT staff, court staff were described as being poor communicators. The court system took little account of the real lives of the people who use it – for example that parents might have to take whole days off work (often losing a day's pay) to attend with their children, only to have the case adjourned and have to do it all over again on another date.

Once they were actually *in* court (as opposed to waiting *at* court), many did not fully understand the system. Parents described how YOT staff were helpful and did explain the system and what would happen next, but that this information was sometimes difficult to take in, particularly if the family was distressed by the circumstances. For young people, the court offered little deterrence, and an important opportunity is lost for young people to become aware of the consequences of their actions.

While these systemic issues are beyond the scope of the YOT, the experience of court impacts on their subsequent work with young people and families who have experienced the court system at the start of their work with the YOT.

### 4.3. The panel

Young people seem to see the panel as another part of the bureaucratic end of the Youth Justice system: something they “have” to do. For parents and carers, the panel can be more a more helpful process in that it gives them information about the system and process. It was clear, however, that the role of the panel could be made clearer to young people and families.

## **4.4. The intervention programme**

In general, both young people and parents and carers expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the work of the YOT, as might be expected of the highest performing YOT in the country. Our analysis identifies a number of factors which contribute to the effectiveness of South Gloucestershire YOT.

### **4.4.1. Understanding:**

Interviewees reported that South Gloucestershire YOT produces good, clear and appropriate written information, although this is not always read by young people. Information is accurate, clear and honest, and this helps young people and their families to understand the role of the YOT, and for young people to address their own offending. YOT workers are (usually) aware that families are “in a state” at first contact, and that this calls for clear and appropriate communication, to enable the development of positive relationships.

### **4.4.2. Inclusion:**

The quality of communication between YOT staff and young people (in particular) underpins the effectiveness of South Gloucestershire YOT, and enables positive change for young people. YOT staff are able to engender trust and respect with young people, in part because they “*pay attention*”, and don’t judge. Their behaviour, and the way they speak with young people also models respectful communication. This was shown as powerfully enabling change. These traits were highly valued by young people, and contribute to a style of working which we describe as “Invisible Enabling” (see below)

Parents feel that the assessment process is positive and constructive, and that through this assessment, YOT staff work on appropriate issues with young people. They generally feel that South Gloucestershire YOT workers are easy to talk to, and helpful. However, parents do not always feel included in the programme, or feel they do not have enough information about it to enable them to best support their children.

### **4.4.3. Inclusion of parents:**

This sense of lacking information was expressed particularly by parents of 17 year olds. Once a young person passes their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, parents are no longer kept in the communication loop, although young people frequently continue living in the parental home, and parental responsibility is still assumed by all, including the parents we interviewed. YOT staff should consider exploring how, within the framework they have, they might be able to:

- Improve feedback with parents – especially of 17 year olds
- Pass on to parents the key messages from their work with young people, including how best to support their children in general and in relation to their work with the YOT.

Parents can be a valuable layer of support for young people, if they are able to give messages to their children that are consistent with the messages being given by YOT staff. This would also enable greater parental support for the YOT process, as well as offering more support for parents.

#### **4.5. A holistic and realistic approach?**

The evaluation considered the extent to which each programme addressed the perceived needs of each young person, in a realistic way; and whether the programme responded flexibly to young people's needs.

Most young people and parents found that their programmes addressed the "pressure points" in their lives, and gave them a set of practical tools which enabled a range of different responses to personal and family problems. Most notable in impact seems to be anger management: most of the young people interviewed had "done anger management" as part of their programme. Young people and parents discussed the very positive impacts of this.

However, some parents felt that there was a need for more than the YOT was able to offer. In these situations, there is a need to explore and make best use of the widest range of alternative resources. If "all [YOT can] offer is 2 sessions", are there other agencies that could pick up on this work? And what access does the YOT have to these agencies? The impact of YOT interventions would be enhanced if YOT staff could link in with a seamless set of resources and services for young people in the Youth Justice system, so that the positive work of the YOT is not lost at the end of the order.

Beneath the need for anger management programmes is emotional literacy. Through our work with South Gloucestershire Children's Fund, we are aware that there is a dynamic programme in some South Gloucestershire primary schools, addressing emotional literacy. The need for such a programme throughout secondary school (and at transition from primary to secondary) is demonstrated by the extent of anger management work by the YOT. The impact of South Gloucestershire's emotional literacy work may well affect the content of the work of the YOT in future years.

#### **4.6. Flexibility**

Our analysis showed that within South Gloucestershire YOT there seems to be an organisational culture which encourages staff to use their own initiative with young people. However, an area that could fruitfully be explored is the capacity for further flexibility within the YOT programme. Programmes were criticised for being too inflexible at times. This related to both their content and timetables. There is a great deal of proscription in the Youth Justice system, and to an extent, the content of the work is a part of this system. A challenge for South Gloucestershire YOT is how to add capacity to enable an increase in its current creativity. This includes continuing and developing its existing partnership work with the wide range of agencies in South Gloucestershire that work with young people and support work to reduce their risk of re-offending.

A lack of flexibility was also discussed in relation to the *style* of some of the YOT work. This was highlighted when some young people criticised the use of "the forms". The content of "the forms" provides a good and useful structure for the work, and contain a body of expertise about the issues they address. They enable staff to raise difficult and probing issues with young people. However, it seems that some young people experience them as too formulaic. For some young people, this style of working has resonance of school, which may have been a very negative

experience. There is also a need to take account of young people's literacy levels when using these written materials: for some young people, the use of written materials presents an instant barrier. While the forms can offer a productive structure for work with some young people, for others, they should be used as a starting, or jumping off point, rather than an exercise in themselves.

A final issue was raised about the flexibility of YOT time-tables. Some parents spoke about clashes with time-tables, for example when young people had jobs or other appointments. Some young people spoke about their YOT time-tables cutting across previously made plans. We question how much flexibility is realistic, given that the YOT process is, fundamentally, punitive. However, given the importance of building trust and treating young people with respect, an equally important question concerns the extent to which it is important for YOT programmes to bend themselves to young people's previously made arrangements, or vice versa.

#### **4.7. Support for families**

"All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion" (Tolstoy)

The evaluation found that South Gloucestershire YOT is usually skilled at taking account of the specific circumstances of young people. However, there were some situations where there was a greater need to marry the needs of the system with the needs, circumstances and experience of each family. At times, support mechanisms were suggested which were inappropriate (e.g. family support groups run at times or in venues which were impossible for particular families), or simply unwanted (e.g. recommendations for family support groups, when what was wanted was some attention to the family context and some understanding about the work the young person was doing with the YOT).

We acknowledge that our early interviews were conducted at a time when the YOT did not have a Family Support Worker on the staff. The interviews demonstrated the gap in provision at this time: it was clear that parents missed the offer of the support from this post, even if they were not aware of the existence of the Family Support Worker role. It is important to ensure that this resource is retained in the YOT team. Part of the role could be to explore how to enhance the skills of all YOT workers, when they work with families.

#### **4.8. Invisible enabling**

"True leaders are hardly known to their followers....

When the work's done right... ordinary people say..

We did it ourselves" (Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching 17)

We have described the ways in which communication underpins the effectiveness of South Gloucestershire YOT staff. It supports, enhances, or inhibits work with young people and families. The evaluation found that change in young people's behaviour may be motivated by the YOT work directly, by personal choices – or by a desire to grow up. Usually change seems to occur through a combination of all three, and while families were more likely to attribute changes in their children to their work with the YOT, young people were more likely to assert that the decision to change was theirs. In this way, South Gloucestershire YOT staff fulfil a valuable function as "invisible enablers".

Analysis of the interviews with young people showed that, for young people, what is said is as important as the way it is said. By engaging effectively with young people, South Gloucestershire YOT staff are able to put across messages that help young people to “think differently”, and so to understand their actions, and assess the consequences of their actions. In a non-judgemental way, YOT staff give young people the space to think through what they have done, and make more constructive choices for the future. They also model alternative behaviours, such as respect, which we have described as a powerful motivator of change.

South Gloucestershire YOT staff, then, adopt an enabling approach, which is not “preaching or teaching” to help young people to realise that they have choices, and can make these choices, and so achieve change.

In analysing the interviews, we were struck by the unobtrusive way YOT staff approach this challenge. Given that the role is a statutory one, this is particularly note-worthy. By handing the decisions to young people (albeit in reality, guiding those decisions carefully), young people feel empowered about their choices: thinking you have done something yourself embeds the lessons that guide the choices and the changes. In this way, South Gloucestershire YOT acts as a catalyst for lasting change.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

The evaluation found that South Gloucestershire YOT is highly effective. It works extremely well in difficult, resource constrained circumstances. It responds to the diverse and specific needs of its client group with a high level of flexibility, particularly in the context of working within the structure of the youth justice system. It was noticeable that YOT interventions are welcomed (primarily by parents) and valued by most of the young people interviewed for this evaluation. This finding deserves attention: the relationship between YOT staff and young people is a compulsory one. We analysed the factors that underpin these positive relationships, and found that South Gloucestershire YOT staff communicate effectively with young people, and this enables them to build trust and both win and engender respect. As a result, young people working with South Gloucestershire YOT were seen to make some real and often lasting changes through their work with the YOT.

## **4.10. Recommendations for South Gloucestershire YOT**

### **1: Future qualitative evaluation:**

*South Gloucestershire YOT should explore possible ways it can undertake future qualitative evaluation internally, rather than through using independent evaluators.* YOTs work to National Standards, most of which measure the more quantitative elements of the work. There is a need to develop effective, workable methods for the routine collection and collation of qualitative data about the impact of the YOT. The current Viewpoint questionnaire is very long, and requires a level of literacy that makes it a rather exclusive process. Also, we have seen how young people are reluctant to fill in “more forms”. Better feedback mechanisms to gather information from parents at the end of the process, about what could be different or better should be developed.

### **2: Replication of best practice:**

*South Gloucestershire YOT should explore how best practice might be shared within the team, building on the examples highlighted in this evaluation report.* This might include developing a team consensus about factors contributing to effective communication with young people, or ways to give appropriate feedback to parents and carers.

### **3: Role of the panel:**

*South Gloucestershire YOT should develop clear, concise, written information about the role of the panel, and ensure that this is given to all parents and young people who are required to attend panel meetings.*

### **4: Flexibility:**

*S Gloucestershire YOT should explore the capacity for further flexibility in their work with young people.* “The forms” should be used as a starting point, rather than an exercise in themselves. Staff should also ensure that they take account of young people’s literacy levels when using these written materials.

### **5: Feedback to parents:**

*South Gloucestershire YOT should consider how it can improve feedback to parents, especially those with children aged 17.* This includes:

- Improving general feedback to parents – especially those of over 17 year olds
- Passing on to parents the key messages from their work with young people, including how best to support their children in general and in relation to their work with the YOT.

### **6: Family support:**

*South Gloucestershire YOT should ensure that it continues to provide, or signpost to, family support resources for parents of the young people working with the YOT.*

South Gloucestershire YOT is able to offer a limited resource: where its resources cannot meet the full range of needs, families might benefit from information about services provided by other agencies.

### **7: Multi-agency working:**

*South Gloucestershire YOT staff should explore how to add capacity to their work, through their existing partnership work with local agencies.* This would enable YOT

staff to continue to extend the support on offer to young people in need in South Gloucestershire, and to work holistically to reduce their risk of re-offending.

## **Recommendations for working with the court system**

### **1: Explanatory information:**

*South Gloucestershire YOT should work with relevant agencies to ensure that all young people and families are sent clear information explaining what will happen at court. There is a real need for clear, accessible and realistic information about the Court system. This should include information about waiting times. It could be, for example, an A4 sheet for parents and young people, sent out with letters about court dates.*

### **2: Waiting times and other issues:**

*South Gloucestershire YOT should consider how it might share the findings from this evaluation which relate to the Youth Court, in a way which will be seen as helpful and constructive. Any changes which will make the experience of young people and their families more positive will have knock-on benefits for the work of the YOT.*

## **Recommendations for South Gloucestershire Council**

### **1. Additional service needs:**

*South Gloucestershire Council and its partners' continued support for South Gloucestershire YOT should include the development of additional support and preventative services. Such services would build on and consolidate the current success of the YOT.*

### **2. Further research:**

*South Gloucestershire Council should consider commissioning research into the impact of its work on emotional literacy. An area for useful research could be the way in which South Gloucestershire' emotional literacy work will change the work of the YOT in future years, and how the YOT's current work contributes to better engagement by young people in school and work. The Youth Justice Board and Government should also consider the role and importance of emotional literacy in work to prevent offending.*

## **The Consultants:**

**Rowan Associates South West Ltd.** is a consultancy practice that draws on the skills and expertise of freelance professionals, to best meet the specific needs of each client. Rowan's approach is rooted in a commitment to the effective planning, policy and provision of public and voluntary services, and to identify and implement creative solutions and achieve effective partnerships. We work with organisations to

- bring an external and independent perspective
- identify & share good practice based on wide ranging experience gained through different research and consultancy assignments

## **Consultants for this evaluation:**

**Lori Streich** is the Director and Principal Consultant at Rowan Associates. She has over 25 years experience of working in the public and voluntary sectors, developing, delivering and managing services, many of which are for young people. She has been working as a freelance consultant and researcher since 1996, and is a skilled facilitator and mediator. Lori works with multi-agency partnerships and assists with strategic development. She has a track record in evaluation and in developing and assessing good practice in policy and service development, including services for young people. Lori believes that the involvement of service users is integral to the development of effective services. For this reason, participation and mechanisms for genuine consultation are areas of expertise. She has a Post Graduate Certificate in Applied Social Research (University of the West of England, 2005). She is a contributor to Mina Matters (community newspaper in St Werburghs and has received Bristol Community Newsletter Awards in 2006 and 2007 for her writing.

[www.rowanassociates.com](http://www.rowanassociates.com)

**Lin Whitfield** is the Director of Lin Whitfield Consultancy. Lin has a background in education and regeneration, and many years' experience of working in the voluntary and community sector to develop, deliver and manage services. She has been working as an independent consultant and evaluator since 2000, and is a skilled facilitator and trainer. Her practical experience is underpinned by theoretical knowledge gained through a Masters' degree (Management Development and Social Responsibility, University of Bristol 1993-95). Lin uses a participative approach in all her work, and believes that those within an organisation are the experts who know best how to move the group forward and effect positive change. Lin undertakes a range of evaluation contracts, including major external evaluations, and supporting partnerships and small projects to design and implement self-evaluation.

[www.linwhitfield.co.uk](http://www.linwhitfield.co.uk)