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'IF YOU JUST LOOK AT RISK, PEOPLE LOOK HORRIFIC' YOUTH JUSTICE PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES OF CHILD FIRST PRACTICE

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Abstract

A Child First approach in youth justice puts children at the centre of service delivery. It aims to create a system that treats 'children as children' with a focus on early intervention, collaboration and removing criminogenic stigma. This is seen as a positive policy shift, although it is unclear how effectively it is applied in the risk-centric context of the Youth Justice System. This paper outlines findings from interviews conducted with youth justice practitioners (N = 7) focussing on their experiences of applying Child First within their work. Using Thematic Analysis, we outline the findings from this study against the four tenets of Child First and discuss barriers to implementation. Despite determination to implement Child First, practitioners felt systemic barriers, including the external service involvement and the risk assessment tool, hindered their ability to do so. We recommend that to establish a truly Child First system, greater clarity is needed to apply the principles on the frontline, alongside an understanding of what Child First means beyond the Youth Justice context to apply the principles system wide. Further research is also required to identify variations in the application of Child First on a local level.

Child First in Youth Justice

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) for England and Wales (2021) has committed to a youth justice system guided by a Child First principle, that treats 'children as children' to help both reduce offending and increase community safety (Youth Justice Board, 2021:9-10). Child First principles are centred around promoting the welfare of children to reduce offending (Drakeford, 2010), an approach already established in Wales. This requires practitioners to work holistically with children, recognising offending behaviour as a small part of their life (Drakeford, 2010). In a review of the Youth Justice System (YJS), Taylor (2016) emphasised the need for children who engage in criminal behaviour to be treated as children, not adults. Taylor suggests that to prevent reoffending, children need to be given the support to overcome problems they face in the community. This requires increased focus on children's strengths, rather than perceived deficits. To facilitate this, Youth Justice practitioners must be equipped to address the complex needs of children, including issues with education, mental health, and welfare (Taylor, 2016). To date, government responses have failed to act on this review with critics claiming attempts to implement changes to the current Youth Justice System are futile (Case and Haines, 2021).

Case and Browning (2021) published an implementation framework for Child First, but it lacks operationalised guidance for those at practice level, instead focusing on stakeholder involvement and their role in implementation. Whilst stakeholder engagement and system level change are needed, it is also vital that practitioners have clear guidance as they are directly interacting with children in their role. The recommendations offered by Case and Browning (2021) focus on stakeholder level change, such as updating guidance and continuing to promote Child First but recognise the need to address the practitioner knowledge gap and practice level guidance. More recently, a Guide to Child First aimed at practitioners was published outlining the four tenets of Child First (Youth Justice Board, 2022). These are 'As Children', 'Building pro-social identities', 'Collaborating with children', and 'Diverting from stigma'. The tenets act as a summary of what works in Youth Justice and should be used as a guide to decision making within the Youth Justice System. However, it could be argued that the current format of the tenets risks diluting the extensive evidence that underpins Child First.

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of youth justice practitioners when applying Child First principles into their practice, particularly when utilising the current risk assessment, AssetPlus. Introduced in 2014, AssetPlus was designed to take a future-focused and strength-based approach to Youth Justice assessments, reducing focus on risks and barriers (Hampson, 2017). It aimed to encourage practitioner discretion, whilst increasing the efficiency of information sharing between agencies. AssetPlus has arguably not produced the desired outcomes, with little coverage on strengths and protective factors (Hampson, 2017).

Before we detail the study and present our findings, we first outline the literature on Child First in relation to four key tenets: As Children; Building Pro-Social Identity; Collaborating with Children; and Diverting from Stigma (Youth Justice Board, 2022).

As Children:

> Prioritise the best interests of children and recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential. All work if child-focused, developmentally informed, acknowledges structural barriers and meets responsibilities towards children (Hazel and Williams, 2023:177)

Within the context of Child First, the definition of 'child' or 'children' is aligned to the Children Act 1989 which states all people aged under 18 are children, despite a long-standing practice to categorise those aged 14 to 18 years as young people (Marshall, 2018). The purpose of this tenet is to clearly articulate that children are not adults, so the approach to working with them should be different. The language around 'children' is deliberate as children are generally perceived to be innocent, vulnerable, and in need of care.(Hendrick, 2015), but, once they become involved within criminal justice systems, they are instead, deemed dangerous and in need of harsh punishment (Case, 2021). Other terminology would not emphasise the responsibilities practitioners have. For instance, 'young offenders' suggests 'mini adult offenders' (Haines and Case, 2015) and 'children and young people' creates a grey area, suggesting only some under 18s are to be worked with in this way (Hazel and Williams, 2023).

Child First encourages practitioners to consider how wider environmental and structural factors can impact children. Individual differences (race, class, ethnicity, sexuality) can impact criminal justice outcomes. Mullen, Blake, Crook et al (2014) found that those from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background were often assessed as higher risk than their white peers. This labelling and adultification of children ignores the power and influence of external environmental, societal and familial factors that contribute to non-normative behaviours and holds the individual child, solely responsible and accountable (Cross, Evans and Minkes, 2002; Goldson, 2013).

Building Pro-social Identity:

> Promote children's individual strengths and capacities to develop their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance, leading to safer communities and fewer victims. All work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society. (Hazel and Williams, 2023 p.179)

The socio-political and cultural climate in which youth justice practitioners operate in is one of many challenges faced when applying Child First in practice. For decades, responses to youth crime have been punitive, reductive, and focussed on risk management (Case and Haines, 2021) making the application of strengths-based approaches arduous. The Child First approach to children in Youth Justice aims to create a more positive environment, offering greater focus on desistance and opportunities for personal development (Youth Justice Board, 2021). The Youth Justice Board aims to uphold these principles throughout a child's journey in the Youth Justice System, from the time of the offence through to reintegration (Youth Justice Board, 2019). This aims to be achieved by building on individual strengths and encouraging participation. Lewis (2014) suggested taking this approach ought to not only make children feel respected but increase their confidence and ability to make positive choices. To achieve this, children need relationships with adults that are close and trusting (Burnett, 2004) emphasising the need for relationship building. Research indicates that a non-judgemental and trustworthy adult is valued amongst children in contact with the Youth Justice System and contributes to their self-development and ability to navigate difficult circumstances (France and Homel, 2006). These positive interactions improve a child's ability to overcome barriers without explicitly focusing on them, meaning a child-centred intervention can still address risk. Having a positive relationship with a practitioner can act as a foundation for personal growth and improved future relationships, even after contact has ceased (Lewis, 2014). However, it is unclear how this can be achieved through the risk assessment process. Risk assessments take standardised approaches to collecting information, which often take a reductionist and retrospective view of offending (Case and Haines, 2009; 2015).

The rigid nature of assessments means outcomes are often unfair. Factors, although dynamic, focus on structural issues that a child has little influence over, such as their living arrangements, family relationships, social class and economic background (McAra and McVie, 2007; Hampson, 2017). This means assessments are likely to show little development, regardless of any progress a child makes which is likely to disengage them (McAra and McVie, 2007; Case and Haines, 2009).Incorporating a Child First approach into youth justice risk assessment requires an approach that challenges misconceptions of children with convictions deserving to be punished. (Case, Creaney, Deakins et al, 2015). Assessments should instead promote protective factors and pro-social relationships. An assessment adopting the key principles of Child First would focus on developing a child's social, emotional, and personal skills whilst promoting self-confidence (Case and Haines, 2015a). A child's life should be viewed holistically, considering their past experiences and their current needs equally (Case and Haines, 2015). By considering the child as an individual, with less comparison to standardised norms, there is hope that assessments will become appropriate for all children in contact with the Youth Justice System (Case and Haines, 2009).

Collaborating with children:

> Encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers. (Hazel and Williams, 2023:182)

Children have the right to participate in all decisions that affect them and under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) have the right to share their views on matters that affect them (Unicef, 1989). Yet, there is a lack of awareness from both children and adults that they possess this right, serving as a barrier to participation and ignoring their expertise (Smithson, Gray and Jones, 2020). The introduction of Child First principles could encourage more meaningful participation of children throughout the assessment and intervention process beyond input around their experiences to inform assessments.

Increasing focus on spending frequent and quality time with children in a social setting, could result in active participation and increased disclosure (Deering and Evans, 2021). This would assist the formulation of a trusting relationship, increasing a child's engagement. Although a trusting relationship is not the only factor that increases engagement, trust is essential, as negative distrustful relationships can result in feelings of anger and resentment towards all support services, and risks undoing any positive development a child has made (Lewis, 2014).

Research suggests that involving children in the intervention planning process is likely to increase engagement and participation, making sessions more productive and beneficial to all those involved (Case and Haines, 2015; Smithson, Gray and Jones, 2020). This, however, contradicts the approach used in current risk assessments. Encouraging a child to influence decision-making, incorporates their lived experiences while also reducing the power imbalance between the child and practitioner (Prior and Mason, 2010). Children are more likely to engage and accept areas of self-development when working towards a goal they have set (Robinson, 2014). To maintain motivation, it is essential for plans to be flexible and focus on small, achievable goals, accounting for dynamic life factors (Robinson, 2014). This is not achievable with a risk-based approach as insufficient time is spent addressing the causes of offending and how to overcome risks (Barry, 2009).

There is a distinct lack of focus on children's voices within AssetPlus as they have little input during the assessment, planning and intervention process. This arguably creates an imbalance of power, where the practitioner is always right and the child is always wrong (Case et al., 2015). It should be noted that AssetPlus does include a self-assessment section to be completed by children and carers (Youth Justice Board, 2014), but arguably this does not go far enough to address the absence of child voice within the assessment as a whole. Practitioners have called for AssetPlus to be simplified, with regular training on how to effectively conduct the risk assessment. They hope that it will become more efficient, and free up time to focus on forming meaningful relationships (Ugwudike and Morgan, 2019).

Diverting from stigma:

> Promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using pre-emptive prevention, diversion and minimal intervention. All work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system. (Hazel and Williams, 2023

:183)

Haines et al, (2013) argue that diversion from stigma is achieved by normalising offending behaviour and diverting children to support services that can respond to their needs. However, when diversion from the Youth Justice System is not possible, the focus needs to be on diverting children from the stigma associated with contact with the system. This largely relates to the language and labelling historically used within the Youth Justice System.

Viewing a child involved in the Youth Justice System as a child first, rather than an offender, helps remove the label of 'criminal' (McAra and McVie, 2010) and thus, prevent stigmatisation. Stigma associated with an offending label for children can be damaging and life changing, leading to external rejection and subsequent social exclusion (Bernburg and Krohn, 2003) as well as an internal process in which the child develops an offending identity (Maruna, 2001). Both factors significantly compromise the desistance process (Bernburg and Krohn, 2003; McAra and McVie, 2010).

Riele (2006) adds that language around 'risk' or labels such as 'a risky child' is counterproductive as it not only pathologises the child but diverts attention away from wider sociological issues contributing to their behaviour. Adopting a 'risk' label homogenises the child as they become characterised by set factors identified as 'risky' in offending populations, rather than looking at all aspects of a child's life and personality (Riele, 2006).

There are socially constructed discrepancies between the definition of a 'child' and of a 'youth' or 'adolescent' in the youth justice context, hence the conscious wording within Child First principles. This has been a long-standing debate, but recent literature suggests that 'children' are typically viewed as innocent, vulnerable, and in need of care whereas 'youths' are viewed as dangerous, risky, and deserving of a punitive response (Case, 2021). Children entering the Youth Justice System are arguably reconstructed, with their status as an 'offender' taking precedence over their status as a child (Case and Bateman, 2020).

The present study aims to answer the question *How have youth justice practitioners experienced the application of Child First within their roles?* Interviews were centred around their experiences of implementing Child First in general, with a specific focus on the application to the AssetPlus risk assessment. This will contribute to the existing evidence around practitioner perceptions of Child First whilst aiming to fill the gap in knowledge around the implementation of Child First at the practice level. This will be achieved through conducting semi-structured interviews with youth justice practitioners in a variety of roles.

Methodology

This study draws on empirical data to address the question *How have youth justice practitioners experienced the application of Child First within their roles?* Semi-structured interviews were undertaken at one English youth justice service. Given the socially constructed nature of juvenile crime and the aim of this research to examine the experiences of those working with children, a constructivist approach was adopted (Lincoln

and Guba, 2016). With Child First being a new policy concept in youth justice (in England), examining the relative nature of individual participants' experiences and realities in the context of a changing social policy required a qualitative approach (Tewksbury, 2009). Seven practitioners participated in the study (three male and four female) undertaking various roles including case management, specialist workers and management. Despite all Youth Offending Teams in England and Wales working within the same legislative, policy and national guidance parameters, it should be noted here that the localised nature of this study may not account for variations in practice between authorities. This, coupled with the limited sample participating in this study, may limit the generalisability of results. However, it would be expected that key themes are likely to emerge across teams.

Prior to interviews, full ethical approval was granted, and participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, along with a consent form. Participants took part in telephone interviews lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Interview questions were based on those used in Deering and Evans' (2021) study which were focused on practitioners' views and experiences of AssetPlus, taking a child-centred approach and ideal youth justice practice. These were expanded on in the present study to include greater attention to Child First. All interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed and checked against the original audio files for accuracy.

A reflexive thematic analysis was conducted as a method for 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes' that emerge from the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006:79). Braun and Clarke's (2022) six steps were used and included step 1) familiarisation of transcripts; 2) transcripts are coded; 3) codes are clustered together and a thematic map is developed; 4) themes are reviewed and edited for both fit and essence across the sample; 5) themes and sub-themes are defined and labelled; and 6) themes are written with a narrative account of the themes across the sample. Each interview was fully transcribed, manually coded and themes developed. Table 1 outlines the subordinate themes identified through the repeated open coding process of each interview. These themes were then reviewed and merged to create the superordinate themes.

Findings:

The findings of this study have been mapped against the four tenets of Child First (Youth Justice Board, 2022) to understand their application in practice. This is followed by reflections on Child First research, recommendations for future study and implications for policy and practice. To maintain the anonymity of the participants involved, pseudonyms have been used throughout.

Child First in Practice:

Participants reported how Child First principles are ingrained in Youth Justice practice. Despite two participants not knowing what Child First was Cathy, the Youth Justice Manager stated, 'we don't talk Child First' all participants were able to describe Child First practice meant 'looking at the child as a child, not an offender' although no elaboration on what 'child' meant was given. Although all participants were able to describe the key principles of Child First, they did not perceive the policy itself had impacted their work as it was not discussed in their roles nor altered their practice. While the principles of Child First

appeared to be part of practice experience, as found by Deering and Evans (2021) more guidance around the delivery of Child First was required. Participants viewed the policy as a positive change and encouraged it to be developed further. Andy, a youth justice worker, felt it is 'always helpful to have it as a policy because new practitioners [...] have a starting point'. However, Erin, a youth justice manager, was more 'sceptical' in that introducing Child First as a policy would create changes to the service they provide. Instead, Erin suggested more clarity was needed from the Youth Justice Board about how they wanted Child First to be applied in practice. Erin claimed, 'I'm not quite sure what they mean'. The inconsistency found in this present sample, in terms of how Child First is understood, raised similar concerns as Bateman (2020; 2022) who argued that the knowledge gap is a result of a lack of guidance.

Throughout the course of the interviews, some inconsistencies in how participants felt Child First should be best applied arose. When discussing the risk assessment tool, Cathy felt to ensure a Child First approach the risk assessment process needed to be 'very structured' but at the same time wanted staff to have more 'creativity and flexibility'. This appears to be a consistent theme across youth justice delivery, with Marshall (2013) highlighting similar discourse from youth justice practitioners when discussing programme delivery. Likewise, Mike, a specialist worker, indicated that a positive consequence of the Child First policy was the 'increased joining up with other children's services' as this promotes information sharing and professional expertise.

As Children

To ensure a Child First approach is adopted, youth justice practitioners need to take a broad view of a child's life, with the aim of understanding who they are as a person. This was encapsulated by Pam, a specialist worker, who stated there can be 'no blanket approach, it's holistic to every single individual'. Consistent with the findings of Drakeford (2010); Erin highlighted the importance of trauma-informed work as it allows practitioners to 'understand what's happened in that young person's life'. Cathy agreed with this sentiment but suggested this should go beyond just 'child action' and include 'family action, family voice' to get a richer understanding of the circumstances that affect the individual child.

Participants suggest that multi-agency working was effective in supporting a holistic, Child First approach to youth justice. This was due to the specific 'expertise' of different services promotes 'wraparound support' for children and their families (Jan). While findings that are echoed by Harris and Allen (2011), Morris (2015) suggests multi-agency involvement can overcomplicate practice and, as found in theme one, can be confusing for the children and families involved. This challenge was reflected in the present study by Mike, who felt 'every worker does have their specialisms' but reflected that 'for families and young people it can be very confusing'.

Participants found that AssetPlus could be a challenge to applying the evidence of this tenet, as they felt the tool was inappropriate for the children and families they work with. Mike noted many children in the Youth Justice System do not have 'the stamina or the skill to read it'. Case and Haines (2009) also found for children with speech and language needs the assessment tool is complex and inappropriate. Although this study referred to Asset, it is

arguable that AssetPlus offers little improvement in terms of the length and complexity of the document.

Wider systemic issues that prevented the successful implementation of Child First in the Youth Justice System were also acknowledged. Erin suggested that the system can be 'quite punitive' not always working in 'the best interest' of the children involved. Reiterated by Cathy who suggested the Youth Justice System is 'very outdated' and by James, a Youth Justice professional who stated, 'I think the age of criminal responsibility […] we need to think about because that would help in our perception of children and their behaviour'.

These comments highlighted that embedding Child First in youth justice may not be as simple as altering practice, instead it may require high-level systemic change (Taylor, 2016). Despite this need, Case and Haines (2021) argue the government have been, and still are, reluctant to make the relevant changes to improve the experience of children in the Youth Justice System. Therefore, despite the best efforts of the practitioners, systemic barriers prevent the implementation of Child First. These barriers cannot be addressed by the Youth Justice System alone, instead this calls for wider acknowledgement and endorsement of Child First beyond a youth justice or criminal justice context.

Building pro-social identity:

Participants felt that establishing a meaningful relationship between the child and their worker is crucial as it serves as a foundation for positive development (France and Homel, 2006; Lewis, 2014). This relationship enables collaborative working between the child and their worker, thus, reducing the power imbalance which is likely to increase engagement and inspire positive development (Case and Haines, 2010; 2015; Smithson, Gray and Jones, 2020). However, developing safe, trusting relationships takes time; practitioners need greater flexibility to build relationships but due to the prescribed 'statutory set' (Andy) length of time allocated to work with a child, work is fettered. Limiting the time allowed to develop and maintain trusting relationships impedes Child First practice as it produces rigid working practice in which practitioner's own agendas become the priority. Given that meaningful relationships are essential to success, practitioners need the flexibility to ensure this. For instance, practitioners need to be free to see a child more often, or for longer than national standards dictate. Time to establish a relationship needs to be factored into the length of a child's statutory order so they can receive appropriate support at a time when they are most likely to engage. The impact of the multi-agency approach in youth justice was also acknowledged here. Mike found children were 'sick of having to tell their story to so many people'. This not only moves away from future-focused conversations but could also hinder the relationship building process.

The notion of risk and risk assessment is a reductive concept, that highlights the problem of recent policy development. As observed throughout youth justice literature (McAra and McVie, 2007; 2010; Taylor, 2016), in which 'risk' has become the driver and priority to decision making and resource deployment. This issue was encapsulated by Andy, who argued that 'if you just look at risk, people look horrific'. Participants advised that the use of strengths in the assessment process offers something 'the young person can buy into' (Andy). Particularly as focusing only on risks can 'be very shameful for young people' (Erin)

and prevent their development. Participants did, however, identify circumstances where risks should be a primary focus as 'you need to be able to ensure that child is safe' (Pam) but that strengths should be identified to 'balance that risk out' (Andy).

Collaborating with children:

Once a relationship is established, interactions should be led by the child whilst the practitioner listens to 'their wishes and feelings' (Erin). Work should be seen as an opportunity for growth rather than a punishment and should be approached as a collaboration between a child and their worker, 'let's learn together, let's do things together' (Andy). To facilitate this, staff need the flexibility to use their professional judgement to ensure each child's specific needs are supported. James noted how this is difficult to achieve at times as 'the needs of the victim and the community' also need to be considered. Echoed by Drake, Ferguson and Briggs (2014), participants used their professional judgement to adapt the service they deliver to best fit each child. While this provides justice for each individual child (see Hurlbert and Mulvale, 2011) this approach can prevent justice being achieved for the community and the victim. This justice challenge can create a barrier to implementing Child First, as practitioners are conflicted by the needs of other parties. To overcome this, a greater understanding of the effects the Youth Justice System can have on children might result in a more tolerant community to enable the welfare of a child as a priority over punishment.

To secure a Child First approach, children need to be in a space that facilitates their journey towards desistance (Hampson, 2017). This was encapsulated by Andy, a youth justice worker who stated, 'it's really important to allow young people space and time to separate themselves from the problems in their lives'. Pam reiterated the importance of safety in both the physical and emotional sense, advocating working with children should always occur in a 'safe place'. Indeed, safe relationships are key to providing children with 'positive role models, somebody else that they can trust' (Cathy). This implies both a metaphorical space, in which children can take time away from their problems and talk to someone they trust, but also refers to the physical space in which these interactions take place. Likewise, Deering and Evans (2021) found a community-based approach to Youth Justice may increase engagement due to a less hostile environment. However, greater clarity of what a safe space is for children is needed and more research is required to determine which environmental factors could increase a child's engagement.

When considering the risk assessment process in this context, Erin felt AssetPlus fails to put the child first, because the time spent completing the assessment prevents her from working directly with her young people. Instead, more time is spent 'writing about them' (Erin) than doing productive work with them. These findings are congruent to those which suggested the process of AssetPlus is an ineffective use of time and resources for both the practitioners and the child (See Picken et al., 2019; Ugwundike and Morgan, 2019). Jan, a Youth Justice manager, questioned 'why are we gathering all that information to simply sit on a server somewhere?' indicating the perceived imbalance of tasks. Despite the essential requirement of gathering and documenting information to make accurate risk assessment and evidencing decisions, practitioners believe this is at the cost of offering face-to-face support.

Diverting from stigma:

Practitioners promoting Child First must engage in child-appropriate language to ensure all written and verbal communication is understood and accessible to children and their families. Practitioners should be 'mindful of the language' they use (Mike) not only to assist effective communication but to avoid labels or stigmatising language as it does 'nothing to empower and enable a young person to make changes' (Jan). It also does not assist them to move away from harmful behaviours and embrace desisting identities. The importance of using non-stigmatising language supports McAra and McVie's (2010) finding that such language prevents positive development. Not only should practitioners use child-friendly language throughout Youth Justice, but they must ensure children understand each stage of the process.

Despite optimism towards Child First, participants noted barriers that prevent its successful implementation. Pam stated the main barrier faced is 'non-engagement' from the children involved. Erin developed this further to suggest that non-engagement can be caused by other service involvement as they can 'rupture that kind of thread of positivity'. Morris (2015) highlighted conflicting goals of multiple agencies can result in inconsistent practice and interfere with the provision of holistic support. For Child First to be fully embedded, it must be practiced by wider services including the police, schools, and any service in contact with children.

Conclusion:

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Youth Justice System practitioners applying Child First. The practitioners interviewed in the present study clearly evidenced the application of the four tenets within their day-to-day practice. However, at times this was hindered by the formal approach within the Youth Justice System. For instance, the lengthy risk assessment tool is not written in a way that children and their families can easily understand. This limits their ability to collaborate on this assessment. The time it takes for practitioners to complete the assessment also takes away from time spent working directly with children to develop their pro-social identity. There are also several systemic barriers present, such as the minimum age of criminal responsibility and the conflicting priorities of statutory services that reinforce the criminogenic stigma Child First strives to remove.

Due to the limited sample of participants within this study and singular local authority involved in the research, the generalisability of these findings must be considered. Future study should look to determine whether these findings are applicable across England and Wales with a focus on including child voice within the study. The application of Child First within services outside of the Youth Justice or criminal justice context should also be explored to understand how Child First can be embedded as a whole system, coordinated approach to supporting children.

While efforts to incorporate Child First principles into practice are observed, we make the following recommendations to assist in this process. First, due to the localised context of this study we recommend wider research to test these findings on a national level, identifying local variations in the application of Child First and best practice. The

development of a clear set of practice level guidance for frontline practitioners are also recommended. These should be co-produced with children, families and practitioners to incorporate their lived experience and professional judgment. This could also include a review of AssetPlus to better align it to the principles of Child First, increasing how user friendly the tool is, both to professionals, children and their families.

There is also a need for increased understanding of what Child First means outside of the Youth Justice System context. This could enable the principles to be applied before a child encounters the justice system and aid in the removal of structural barriers that prevent both the successful integration of Child First, and from children achieving their full potential in society. More efforts are required to remove these barriers, but it is unclear whether embedding Child First principles will be enough to contradict the deep-rooted criminogenic stigma present within society as this would require a shift in the public perception of children who offend.

To conclude, Child First is a positive shift in Youth Justice, it has the potential to create widespread change for children involved in the system. To accomplish this, a child needs a supportive environment that motivates them to make positive changes to their life. This needs to stretch beyond Youth Justice and requires a whole system, co-ordinated approach to Child First to recognise and address children's unmet needs early and prevent formal contact with the Youth Justice System.

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