

The Medway Youth Offending Team (YOT) – an introduction for Members

What is a YOT?

Youth Offending Teams (YOT`s) were introduced by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and were established in England and Wales in April 2000. They have primary responsibility for the provision of local youth justice services with the aim of preventing offending and re-offending by children and young people. Medway YOT brings together the staff and wider resources of a range of local agencies. The rationale for this multi-disciplinary approach is that the underlying predisposing factors which cause offending behaviour can be addressed speedily and effectively.

The work of YOT`s is guided by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) which is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Ministry of Justice but with important input also from the Department for Children, Education & Families.

The functions of the YJB include monitoring the operation of the Youth Justice System and the provision of youth justice services; setting National Standards; promoting good practice; a commissioning and purchasing secure facilities for juveniles who are on remand or who have received a custodial sentence.

The Medway YOT

In the Medway context, the work of the YOT is overseen by the Medway YOT Management Board, which is now chaired by the Chief Executive of the Local Authority. This Board is made up by senior representatives of the five key statutory agencies –

- Social Services;
- Education;
- Probation;
- Police and
- Health,

In addition, YOT Managers and a range of other agencies are also represented, including the Connexions service, Housing, Medway Equalities Council and Cookham Wood YOI

The Management Board meets on a quarterly basis and receives performance reports from the YOT Manager. It provides the governance arrangements for the YOT, and has corporate ownership for preventing youth

offending. The Management Board is also responsible for ensuring the delivery of the Youth Justice Plan and ensuring that the YOT is adequately resourced and funded.

Given the multi-agency nature of the YOT, and the fact that it operates across both criminal justice and children's Services, it is important that it is represented within the key partnerships. Consequently, the YOT Manager represents the YOT on a variety of partnership groups, including the Community Safety Partnership, Children's Trust, Safeguarding Board and Kent criminal Justice board.

The YOT is funded from a number of different sources: through the partner agencies in terms of seconded staff, "in kind", and through other delegated funds, with Children's Services of Medway Council being the largest contributor with also a substantial contribution in the form of grants from the Youth Justice Board.

The YOT is located at 67 Balfour Road, Chatham. There are currently 42 staff in the service both full and part time (see staffing structure plan). In addition there is a seconded team of five social workers located within Cookham Wood YOI, who are responsible for carrying out a range of resettlement functions. The work of the YOT is also supported by around 30 trained volunteers who sit on Referral Order Panels.

The YOT work closely with Cookham Wood Young Offenders Institution and have a team of social work staff seconded into the prison to form the core of the resettlement team.

Performance measures

The YOT are measured on key national indicators which are reported to the Youth Justice Board, Community Safety Partnership, the YOT Management Board and the Children's Trust. These are based on rates of first time offenders and the rate of re-offending. Targets are also measured on the rates of custodial sentences, offenders in education employment and training and instances of offenders falling into 'vulnerable groups' such as looked after children and those from ethnic minorities.

The YJB rates the Medway YOT as 'good'.

Changes in operation

There have been changes in the way a YOT is expected to practice, with more to follow

Criminal Justice: Simple, Speedy, Summary (CJSSS)

CJSSS is primarily about improving the speed and effectiveness of Magistrates' and Youth Courts and has two main targets:

- to reduce the number of hearings from an average of five or six to just one for guilty pleas and two for contested cases and
- to reduce the average time taken from charge to disposal to six weeks or less.

Youth orders are to be replaced by a single Youth Rehabilitation Order. To be an effective YOT practitioner it is essential that the team are able to accurately predict and target risk, enabling resources to be effectively deployed.

There is an expectation that within the near future the YJB will make the cost of custodial sentences chargeable to the local authority. While the budget will be delegated to local authorities, this would have significant implications to children's services for managing costs as well as commissioning services as alternatives to custody. If magistrates are satisfied that the package of support for a young person is sufficient to prevent re-offending and protect the public, a custodial sentence would be unlikely. Such packages (such as intensive therapeutic fostering) are costly but can have excellent impact on re-offending rates.