

Agenda Alliance's response to the Justice Committee's call for evidence on Children and Young Adults in the Secure Estate

March 2026

About Agenda Alliance

[Agenda Alliance](#) exists to make a difference to the lives of women and girls who are at the sharpest end of inequality. We are an alliance of over 130 member organisations – from large, national bodies to smaller, specialist organisations – working in collaboration to influence public policy and practice to respond appropriately to women and girls with multiple unmet needs.

Within this submission, we have focused specifically on the needs of girls and young women in the secure estate. Our [Young Women's Justice Project](#), historically run in partnership with the [Alliance for Youth Justice](#), was the first to make the national case for the needs of young women at risk of the criminal justice system (CJS), including girls transitioning from the youth to adult justice system as they turn 18. Through the project, we have published key reports with recommendations focused on the needs of girls and young women in contact with the CJS, including [A Call to Action](#), ["We've Not Given Up"](#), and [Falling Through the Gaps](#).

The appropriateness and suitability of the youth estate for children and young adults

1. To what extent is the current mix and number of custodial settings (YOIs, STCs, SCHs and Secure School) fit for purpose in meeting the complex needs and welfare requirements of children and young adults in secure settings?

We welcomed the government's decision to end the use of Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) for girls' placement in the secure estate. However, we are concerned about the lack of government commitment to ending the use of Secure Training Centres (STCs) for girls.

Girls have historically reported feeling more unsafe in these environments than boys,¹ where their gender-specific needs are often overlooked. The use of custody must always be a last resort for girls but – where it is used – much more must be done to ensure girls’ gender-specific needs are met.

5. Following the decision to end YOI placements for girls, what are the current challenges in ensuring that Secure Children’s Homes and the Secure School are sufficiently resourced, trained and meet the highly complex and trauma-driven needs of girls?

To ensure Secure Children’s Homes and Secure Schools are able to meet the highly complex and trauma-driven needs of girls, they must develop effective training, consider intersecting identities and embed co-production throughout their work.

Training: Training should be developed that speaks to the age-specific and gendered needs of girls, as well as being trauma-informed and culturally responsive. Training should be developed in partnership with specialist organisations who already have guidance on gender, trauma, age, and culturally responsive approaches to working with girls and young women.

Intersecting identities: Practitioners and youth justice staff must consider how girls and young women’s intersecting identities – including race, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, and gender identity – can compound disadvantage, and how this drives their contact with and informs their experience of the youth justice system. They must recognise the ways in which this can create barriers to engagement, and should take effective steps to dismantle these.

Co-production: Girls and young women must be consulted on the services they interact with. Co-production should be centered in the development of any guidance or training for Secure Children’s Homes and Secure Schools staff. This should factor in feedback loops to repeatedly receive insights from girls and young women, including those who are transitioning from the youth to adult estate. Co-production should be transparent, ensuring girls and young women are clear about what information is being shared, and how it will be used.

We support the recommendation in Susannah Hancock’s independent review for the development of a national pathway to meet the needs of girls in secure settings which defines the gender responsive, trauma-informed services that girls in secure accommodation need.²

¹ Pippa Goodfellow (2024) [An Exploration of Factors Influencing the Recent Levels of Incarceration of Girls in England and Wales](#)

² Ministry of Justice (2025) [Delivering The Best for Girls in Custody](#)

This pathway, and any accompanying guidance, must be developed in consultation with girls and young women with lived experience, as well as specialist organisations across the criminal justice, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and youth sectors, including organisations led by and for Black, Asian, minoritised and migratised women and girls.

6. How effectively are the specific and complex needs of neurodivergent children (e.g. those with ADHD, autism or learning disabilities) and children who have experienced significant trauma being identified, assessed and met through tailored provision in custody?

Girls entering the criminal justice system have often faced considerable disadvantage and experienced significant trauma, such as poor mental health, violence, abuse and exploitation, poverty and discrimination. Whilst we are pleased to see consideration of complex needs and trauma within this call for evidence, and within the Government's response to Susannah Hancock's independent review, there is not currently sufficient, gendered provision to meet the needs of girls in custody. This is illustrated through increased instances of girls' self-harm, use of force toward them within the youth estate, and their rates of reoffending.

Self-harm in custody: While there has been a significant reduction in self-harming this year, a large majority of the girls within youth custody are still consistently engaging in self-harm. Even at its lowest rate over the past 4 years, girls self-harmed at over 10 times the rate of boys. Girls who self-harm tend to do so repeatedly (13.5 times in 2024/25, 75.2 times in 2022/23) - showing that existing mental health support is failing to effectively curb the cycle of harm that these girls are experiencing.³

Use of force: In 2024/25, 19 girls experienced 332 uses of force meaning that each girl experienced on average 17.47 uses of force, compared to 5.38 incidents for each of the 786 boys that experienced uses of force.⁴

Reoffending rates: Between 2020 and 2024, the number of reoffences by girls who had previously been in custody increased by 79% (from 238 to 426), however the number of girls committing those reoffences reduced from 46 to 28. As such, a smaller number of girls are responsible for a greater number of reoffences. This is also a growing issue, with girls who have previously been in custody reoffending 15.21 times on average in 2024, compared to 5.17 in 2020.⁵

³ Ministry of Justice (2026) [Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate: Update to September 2025](#)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ministry of Justice (2026) [Proven reoffending statistics: January to March 2024](#)

As noted in the Girls Youth Justice Advisory Board Terms of Reference, girls make up such a small percentage of children held in the youth estate that policy and provision has historically focused on the needs of boys within the estate.⁶ As stated in our response to question 5, we support the recommendation made by Susannah Hancock in her independent review and want to see a national pathway for girls, developed in line with the evidence base, which defines the gender-responsive, trauma-informed services that girls in secure accommodation need, and the commissioning required across departments to meet those needs.⁷

Violence, safety and disorder

8. What are the key drivers of the high levels of violence, self-harm and the use of restraint/force in the children and young adults secure estate and what immediate and long-term actions are required to ensure a safe environment?

Girls and young women in the secure estate often have high levels of unmet need including experience of violence and abuse, exclusion from school, experience of the care system and high rates of poor mental health. Left unaddressed, these needs can be compounded by treatment in youth custody settings, including the use of force, which we know girls experience at a disproportionately high level compared to their male peers. Both witnessing and experiencing the use of force/restraint can be re-traumatising and disempowering, exacerbating girls' unmet needs.⁸

Sexual violence: Between three quarters and 90% of girls in the youth justice system may have experienced abuse from a family member or someone they trusted.⁹ Outside of custody, before the age of 16, 15-20% of girls are estimated to have experienced childhood sexual abuse, compared to 7-8% of boys.¹⁰ In one study, one in three girls, aged 13 to 17, reported some form of sexual violence by their partner, compared to one in six boys.¹¹

Mental health: Girls are more likely than boys to self-harm and are more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act. In 2024/25, 58% of those under 18 detained under the act were girls.

⁶ Ministry of Justice (2026) [Girls in Youth Justice Advisory Board, Terms of Reference](#)

⁷ Ministry of Justice (2025) [Delivering The Best for Girls in Custody](#)

⁸ Centre for Mental Health (2021) [Out of Sight](#)

⁹ Agenda Alliance (2022) ["We've Not Given Up"](#)

¹⁰ McNeish and Scott (2018) [Key messages from research on intra-familial child sexual abuse](#)

¹¹ Barter, C et al (2009) [Partner Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships](#)

The difference is particularly stark for those 15 and under, where 73% of those detained under the act are girls.¹² Girls aged 11-19 are also more likely to have a mental health condition than boys.¹³

Exclusions: For many girls and young women, exclusion from education plays a significant role in driving the spiral of disadvantage that can lead to contact with the criminal justice system. Once excluded, or missing from school, girls can face a series of escalating risks and negative outcomes, including heightened risk of criminal and sexual exploitation. Research has found that 74% of girls in youth custody have previously been permanently excluded, compared to 63% of boys.¹⁴

Racism in custody: Black, Asian and minoritised girls and young women face simultaneous and overlapping forms of discrimination, greater barriers in accessing support, and reduced access to specialist services. Whilst we know that Black and minoritised young women are over-represented in custody, the most recent data shows 58% of girls (10-17) entering custody are categorised as being of unknown ethnicity.¹⁵ This makes it challenging to understand disproportionalities across ethnic groups, and advocate for appropriate support.

Care experience: Girls and young women with experience of care are also consistently overrepresented in the criminal justice system, with nearly two thirds of girls and young women (16–21) in custody estimated to have been in statutory care, compared to just under half of boys.¹⁶

Impact of trauma: Trauma can display as ‘disruptive’ behaviour, often met with disciplinary responses, rather than addressing its root cause. Girls often internalise their distress, meaning their challenges may go unnoticed until they have reached crisis point.

To ensure their needs are met, girls need gender and trauma-informed support, which accounts for their age, and is culturally responsive. To address the high levels of use of force and restraint against girls in custodial settings, targets for change must be set with regular monitoring and reporting.

¹² 4 girls under 15 per 100,000 were detained under the Mental Health Act in 2024/25 compared to 1 boy per 100,000. 45 girls age 16 to 17 per 100,000 were detained compared to 42 per 100,000. NHS England (2025) [Mental Health Act Time Series Dashboard](#)

¹³ NHS Digital (2023) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey](#)

¹⁴ Agenda Alliance (2022) [“We’ve Not Given Up”](#)

¹⁵ Ministry of Justice (2025) [Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: June 2025](#)

¹⁶ Agenda Alliance (2021) [Falling Through the Gaps](#)

Transitions to adult custody

16. How effective is the planning and support for the transition of young people (aged 18+) into the adult prison system and are their complex needs adequately transferred and maintained?

When young women in contact with the criminal justice system transition from childhood to legal adulthood, limitations are often placed upon their access to services and they may be required to transition into a range of adult systems. They are often confronted with arbitrary cliff-edges in access to support, less flexible approaches to “non-compliance” and a greater focus on punishment and public protection. As one youth engagement practitioner speaking with Agenda Alliance as part of the Young Women’s Justice Project described:

“Young women don’t forget all their trauma and everything that’s happened to them as a child when they turn 18, but suddenly they’re under probation services and some forms of support stop overnight. We need to start thinking about redefining the expectations and responsibilities placed on young women in the 18 to 25 age bracket.”¹⁷

Similar issues appear to characterise the experiences of girls transitioning from the youth secure estate to the adult prison system too, with practitioners raising concerns about the difficulty supporting girls and young women transitioning from youth custody to women’s prisons.¹⁸ We know that girls experience these transitions different to boys, partly because of the lack of focus on the needs of girls in youth custody due to the small number that receive custodial sentences. Whilst young men between the ages of 18 and 20 may be held in YOIs, there is no provision of this kind for young women turning 18 whilst in custody. Instead, they move straight to adult women’s prisons – environments where a failure to identify and address the needs of young women has been highlighted as a “consistent feature” of inspections.¹⁹ Practitioners have also raised concerns about a lack of referrals to community support services from the secure estate for young women leaving custody, and difficulties reaching young women in custody before their release.²⁰

Both practitioners and young women we spoke to as part of our Young Women’s Justice Project underlined the importance of providing ongoing and consistent support to navigate the complexity of the system and the challenge of transitions. To achieve this, specialist young women’s outreach workers who can intensively work with young women, while supporting them to

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Allen, R. (2016) [Meeting the needs of young adult women in custody](#).

²⁰ Agenda Alliance (2021) [Falling Through the Gaps](#)

navigate services, should be available across the country. This would allow young women to receive ongoing support from independent professionals during the transition to adulthood, who are then able to liaise with the agencies newly responsible for working with the young women as adults.

The Ministry of Justice must ensure there is a coordinated, gender-specific approach to the transitions of girls turning 18 in community and in custody, including a focus on those with experience of care who are particularly at risk of falling through the gaps. For young women in the secure estate, this must include developing internal mechanisms to support leaving care services and criminal justice services to work in partnership, to ensure support is in place for young women as they enter the adult estate and on release.

18. In what ways does treating offenders aged 18-25 as a separate cohort improve outcomes compared to their inclusion in the general adult prison population?

Rather than treating offenders aged 18-25 as a separate cohort, work in this space must focus specifically on treating young women aged 18-25 as a separate cohort. Young women are a minority within the criminal justice system on account of both their age and gender, and are consequently an overlooked and consistently disregarded group. Many young women describe feeling unsafe, alienated, and retraumatised by services that have, by default, been designed around the needs of men and boys, or older adult women. Failing to meet their needs at an early stage means that opportunities to provide effective support are often missed, leading to an escalation of disadvantage and perpetuating a cycle of harm. Rather than receiving meaningful support, many young women are driven into further harm, with an increased risk of future contact with the criminal justice system and worsened life outcomes.

Young women's experience of coming into contact with the criminal justice system is underpinned by experiences of violence and abuse, poor mental health, addiction, exclusion from education, poverty and having no safe place to call home. The challenges they face are mutually reinforcing and take place in a wider context of social and structural inequalities which shape their lives, including gender-inequality and racism. These young women may have also experienced a transition from the youth to adult estate – during which time they often experience a drop-off in support in relation to their needs. Young women with intersecting and marginalised identities are disproportionately impacted and criminalised, with their needs particularly neglected. Black, Asian, minoritised, and migratised young women experience inequality on account of their ethnicity and immigration status, as well as their age and gender. In addition, many care-experienced young women encounter ingrained prejudice within the system, leading to disproportionate criminalisation.

The Ministry of Justice must publish a dedicated strategy for young women in contact with the criminal justice system, to prioritise early intervention and end the cycle of harm. This must outline steps to address the unmet needs driving young women's experiences of criminalisation, including experiences of violence and abuse, exploitation, contact with the care system, exclusion from school, racism and adultification, and poverty. This strategy should be cross-departmental, and build on commitments in the VAWG Strategy to improve support for women in the criminal justice system, as well as commitments in the National Youth Strategy to deliver a network of Young Futures Hubs intended, in part, to reduce the risk of young people being drawn into crime. Alongside this, MoJ should appoint a Young Women's Advisory Board of young women with lived experience of the system, to support in the development of this strategy. Young women should be engaged by and supported to participate by specialist services, including by and for organisations. Both young women involved, and the specialist frontline organisations supporting them, should be remunerated for their time, including compensation for travel, childcare, and any follow-on support.