

“They can completely change a life”

An Evaluation of the Custody Navigators Programme Merseyside

Dr Evelyn Hearne, Public Health Institute, LJMU

Chelsea Rutherford, Custody Navigator

Beth Chai-Thompson, Custody Navigator



Public Health Institute
LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY



Background

- ▶ Children are “vulnerable by law (but not by nature)”¹
- ▶ Age of criminal responsibility is set at 10 years old in the UK.²
- ▶ A disproportionate number of children who experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or who have neurodevelopmental disability within the criminal justice system.³
- ▶ In 2025, MVRP funded a custody navigator programme based within Copy Lane Custody Suite.
- ▶ In its pilot year, this employed two full-time custody navigators through Sefton Council who work with children aged 10-17 years old.
- ▶ The primary aim of the programme is to divert children away from the criminal justice system, specifically violent crime.
- ▶ Evidence of the impact of custody-based interventions and whether they achieve their intended outcomes is difficult to measure.⁴

1 Dehaghani, R. (2017). ‘Vulnerable by law (but not by nature)’: examining perceptions of youth and childhood ‘vulnerability’ in the context of police custody. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*; 2 Bevan, M. (2022). The pains of police custody for children: A recipe for injustice and exclusion? *British journal of criminology*; 3 Sheahan, F. (2026). *Children in Police Custody: Adversity and Adversariality Behind Closed Doors*. *Howard journal of crime and justice*. 4 Wilson, C., Farrugia, A. M., Butler, N., & Quigg, Z. (2025). *Evaluation of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Custody Navigator RESET Programme*.

Role of Custody Navigators

- ▶ The role of the Navigators is to provide children with support in a time of crisis.
- ▶ “Teachable” moment
- ▶ Navigators will identify a child’s immediate needs and develop a plan of support for the child taking a whole-person, holistic approach.
- ▶ Other ongoing support includes providing information and signposting to appropriate services such as **education, training, drugs and alcohol services, employment, accommodation, and financial advice.**
- ▶ Any child aged 10-17 years, from any local authority, who is arrested and taken to Copy Lane is eligible for custody navigator support.

Evaluation Methodology

- We conducted a feasibility and pilot evaluation of the Custody Navigator Programme at Copy Lane Custody Suite between April 2025/2026

	Review of Programme Documentation
	Review and Analysis of Programme Monitoring Data
	Qualitative interviews <i>Stakeholders (n=12)</i> <i>Parents (n=2)</i> <i>Children (n=3)</i>
	Child Case Studies <i>N=5</i>

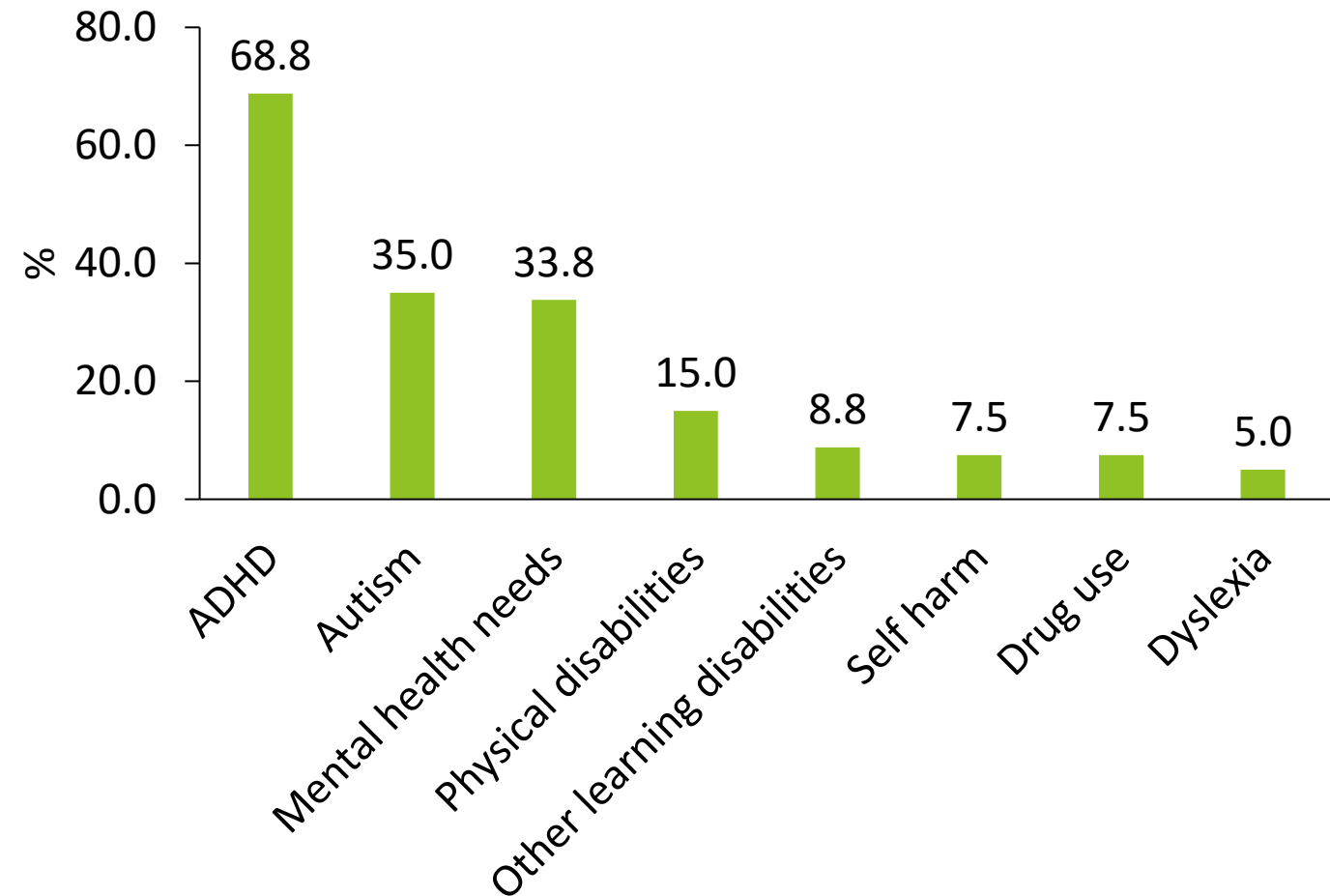
Evaluation Findings

Programme Dose & Reach

- ▶ 132 children eligible for custody navigator support.
- ▶ The majority (84%; $n=102$) of children agreed to be seen by the navigators while in custody.
- ▶ 62 children consented to follow up support in the community.
- ▶ 36 engaged with the follow up support.
- ▶ The majority of children offered support were male (87.3%), White British (93.2%), and aged 15-17 years (76.5%).

Programme Reach - Children's Needs

- ▶ 59.1% known to any services.
- ▶ 52.3% had social care involvement.
- ▶ 63.0% had a disability or health need.
- ▶ ADHD the most commonly recorded type of disability/health need.
- ▶ 36.8% NEET.



Barriers

- ▶ Recruitment
- ▶ Initial onboarding the custody navigators to local authority and police systems
- ▶ Different policies and procedures in place by different local authorities

When we're trying to safeguard children who are coming into custody ... St. Helens, Knowsley, Liverpool, Wirral and Sefton have all got different processes. And as a person who's just trying to get a child protected and safeguarded, it can take a long time (S2)

Facilitators

- ▶ Navigators background in youth work and teaching - not Police or social care
- ▶ Acceptance and multi-agency partnership working within the custody suite between youth justice, police, liaison and diversion (L&D), and the custody navigators.
- ▶ Trauma informed training
- ▶ Dedicated space in the breakout room and adaptations to the custody cells.

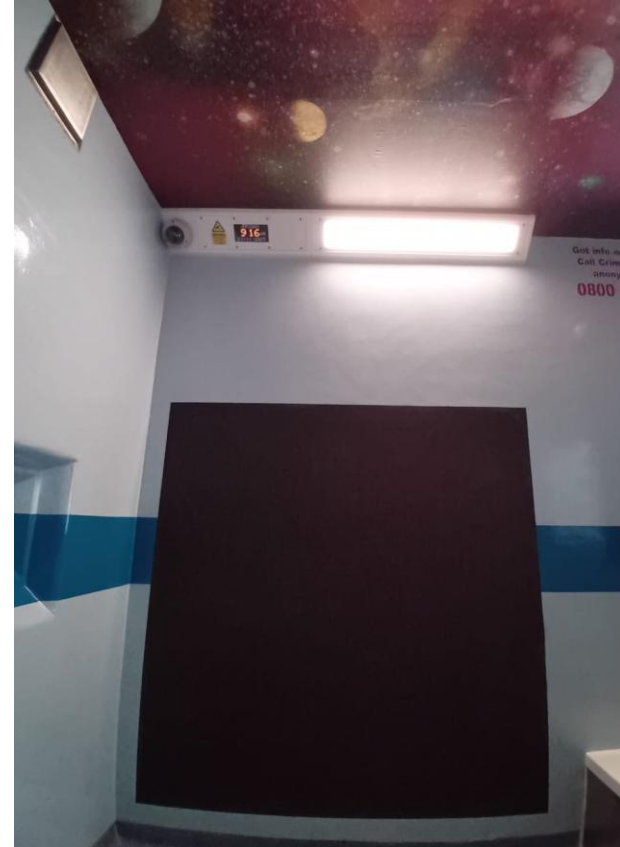
“They've built up such fantastic relationships with children and families who have been so resistant to accessing any support previously.

And we've been able to broker relationships with, say, children's social care where before they've shut the door on them and said you're not coming in ...

We've had a number of families who've said, 'I'll let the social worker in if you're with me' or 'I'll go to that meeting if you're there'" (S4)



“Clocks have been put in so they can see the time. Because we find that one of the biggest things within a cell is that people lose track of time and it can really cause anxiousness and dysregulate behaviour” (S5)



“We've got the space-scape, and we asked youth justice kids about what they would want in the cell. So, we made sure that it was appropriate” (S7)

“The custody environment is a difficult one to process at the best of times, but specifically when you're a child ... can be very scary, frightening specifically with children who have SEND needs ... it's important to recognise those ... and help them regulate those behaviours to make it a more comfortable stay” (S5)



Experiences & Emerging outcomes

- ▶ Need more quantitative measures to evaluate impact of the programme
- ▶ Positive experiences related to the navigator's ability to build trusting, supportive relationships with children and their families.
- ▶ Navigators build strong working relationships with other stakeholders supporting services and practitioners.
- ▶ Parents reported observing positive changes in their child such as returning to education and engagement in social activities.
- ▶ Children felt that the navigator programme has supported them during bail conditions diverting them from being arrested again
- ▶ Children reported being back in education and a supportive routine.
- ▶ Use of language around 'children' (replacing the word juvenile) shows system-level cultural change within the police custody environment.

Case Study

Child A

Chelsea - Custody

- ▶ Severe LD
- ▶ AA - Mum (Severe LD)
- ▶ Police unaware
- ▶ Dad unable to attend due to financial issues
- ▶ Navigators supported
- ▶ Navigators referred to Mash
- ▶ Navigators created custody passport to best support child during custody stay
- ▶ Enabled safe, trauma informed environment for Child A in custody

Beth - Community

- ▶ Music workshop
- ▶ Impact of bail conditions - unable to see peers/mental health implications
- ▶ 6 sessions with a successful band
- ▶ Boost in confidence
- ▶ Open mic nights attended
- ▶ Intervention led by child's interests/passion for music

Next Steps & Recommendations

- ▶ Recommend more navigators in post
- ▶ Recommend more child custody suites in Merseyside
- ▶ Evaluation 2026/27
- ▶ More quantitative data collected and recorded to measure distance travelled of children they engage with
 - ▶ in the custody setting
 - ▶ an intervention end point/predetermined time period
- ▶ Quantitatively measure self-assessed levels of need across several domains
 - ▶ emotional wellbeing
 - ▶ family and peer relationships
 - ▶ substance use
 - ▶ Education
 - ▶ decision making and behaviours
 - ▶ feelings of safety

Thank You

- ▶ Custody Navigators
- ▶ For listening
- ▶ Participants
- ▶ Merseyside VRP
- ▶ Evaluation Team at PHI, Liverpool John Moores:
 - ❑ Dr Jane Harris
 - ❑ Charley Wilson
 - ❑ Louise Crane
 - ❑ Professor Zara Quigg



E.Hearne@ljmu.ac.uk