

Justice Committee Inquiry: Children and Young Adults in the Secure Estate

Written evidence submitted by Spark Inside, March 2026

Introduction

Established in 2012, Spark Inside has worked with over 2000 people who live and work in prisons, using coaching, provided by expert, accredited coaches, to unlock the potential of individuals and drive culture change in the criminal justice system. Our focus is on young adult men (aged 18-30), although we have delivered extensively across Youth Offending Institutes to boys over 15, and began supporting women in custody in 2025. Our flagship coaching programme, Hero's Journey™, was independently evaluated by [The Social Investment Consultancy](#), and we have recently published [a service audit](#) by Dr. Noreen Dera of our 'Black Hero's Journey' programme (co-designed to address the specific experiences of young Black men).

Spark Inside's [Being Well Being Equal](#) campaign is funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust and calls for wellbeing support for young Black men (aged 18-25) in prison to be prioritised and tailored to meet their specific needs. Our response is informed by the young men in custody, and recently released from custody, who have contributed to our Being Well Being Equal campaign.

Summary of Response

Spark Inside welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation and draws on the insight and experience shared with us by young men.

Young men tell us that they often feel unable to access mental health support in custody due to multiple inter-related challenges including: mistrust of services, stigma (particularly in an ultra-macho prison environment), reluctance to retell their story, limited awareness of how to access services or what services exist, difficulties in interpreting or communicating their mental health needs (particularly if neurodiverse or have experienced trauma). For young Black men these challenges are exacerbated due to racial disparities in access to and experience of mental health support, and inequitable treatment within the justice system.

Young men tell us that the high levels of violence, self-harm and the use of restraint/force amongst children and young adults are complex issues influenced by

interconnected systemic, institutional, and individual factors. They highlight under-resourced and over-crowded prison environments that often fail to meet their basic social, emotional and physical needs, as having a significant detrimental impact on their wellbeing. For young Black men their experiences of prison life can be even more detrimental to their mental health, with less access to family support, experiences of discrimination and adultification, poorer relationships with prison staff and increased experience of physical isolation, compared to their white peers. The complex needs of young people in custody and their levels of developmental maturity (and how prison regimes respond to this), alongside institutional cultures and the wellbeing of prison staff, are also contributing factors.

Young men suggest the following key actions are necessary in creating a secure environment for children and young people in the prison estate:

- adopt 'whole prison approaches' to wellbeing
- develop regimes, practice and policy that responds to the distinct needs (including those of Black and minority ethnic groups) and developmental maturity of young adults
- improve access to activities and interventions that promote wellbeing in young people
- target support at points of transition
- recognise the role that young people play in creating the solutions
- support prison staff to respond effectively to young people's mental health needs.

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

Q2. Are children and young people currently able to access purposeful activity, education and healthcare (particularly mental health services) as required whilst in custody?

Young men tell us that there are many inter-related challenges that they face in being able to access mental health support in custody. These challenges are exacerbated for young Black men, who as [The Lammy Review](#) has identified, 'are less likely to be recorded as having problems, such as mental health, learning difficulties and troubled family relationships, suggesting many may have unmet needs'. Challenges include:

Mistrust in services: many young people have had poor and/or discriminatory experiences of statutory services, resulting in a distrust in professionals and a

reduced willingness to ask for help. For young Black men, racial disparities in access to and experience of mental health support (including racial stereotyping and adultification bias), alongside their experience of inequitable treatment within the justice system, can further erode trust in services.

'I just feel like I've been failed because every time I've told people something, it's like, because I'm so knowledgeable about what's wrong with me, it's like, oh, he can't be, there's nothing wrong with him. He must be okay. He must be trying to play a game or something. I'm definitely not.' (Young man)

'It just doesn't feel like it's coming from a genuine place or a safe place... It almost feels like is this person just trying to get information from me or something?' (Young man)

Masculinity: masculinity is frequently associated with traits such as stoicism and self-reliance, and while these qualities are often seen as strengths, they can discourage young men from displaying vulnerability or asking for help. The ultra-macho prison environment serves to exacerbate the stigma associated with vulnerability and encourages young men to maintain a 'mask of bravado':

'I'd say pride is a big thing, and men don't want to be seen as weak isn't it, or vulnerable... So yeah, I feel like a lot of men, or especially Black men living a certain lifestyle don't want to be perceived as being weak, or soft.' (Young man)

Stigma: young men, particularly young Black men, continue to tell us about the significant stigma associated with mental health and the barrier this creates to accessing services or asking for help:

'As young Black people in prison, it's like mental health is so, it's so stigmatised. Within our cultures, it's not something that's acknowledged at all. It's not something that's freely spoken about, so in prison now, everybody's got this mask up.' (Young man)

Prevalence/normalisation of mental-ill health in prison environments: young men have described how the prevalence of trauma and mental ill-health in prison environments serves to normalise mental-ill health and minimise what that they might be feeling, further reducing their inclination to seek support:

'You know what even makes it worse, is the fact that all of the man dem are mentally ill, so we're all like, oh yeah, it's normal, you know what I mean?' (Young man)

Pressure to re-tell your story: young men have shared the frustration of having to re-tell their often-traumatic personal stories to professionals as they move through the criminal justice system, only to not have support put in place. They described how this can make them reluctant to repeat their stories or ask for support:

'What's your childhood? Childhood, childhood, childhood, childhood. I talk about it so much that it's like I'm still in my childhood. I'm still living my childhood memories now. I can't get rid of it.' (Young man)

Difficulties with identifying symptoms or communicating concerns: a lack of understanding about mental health (amongst staff and young people) and how mental ill-health can manifest, can prevent young men from recognising they need support. In addition, young people who have experienced trauma or who are suffering with mental ill-health, may find it difficult to interpret or communicate their feelings and emotions.

'I feel like there's not enough education about mental health, understanding why your brain and your body reacts the way it does and works the way it does because if you then understood it, you'd be able to process it.' (Young person)

'Everything's always been revolved and built on anger, and I never ever knew how to deal with it. No one ever told me how to deal with it.' (Young person)

Limited awareness of services/resources to support mental wellbeing in custody: young men have highlighted that some young people in custody may be unaware of what support services exist or how to use prison systems to access that support particularly if they are new to an establishment or the criminal justice system and/or do not have experience of accessing healthcare services or initiatives independently.

Violence, safety and disorder

Q8. 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?

The prison environment and regime

The NHS Health and Justice Framework (2022-25), HMIP's Annual Report (2023/4) and Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (2025) highlight the contribution of aging prison buildings, overcrowding, under-resourcing and restricted regimes on the

declining mental health and wellbeing of people in prison. For young Black men their experiences of prison life can be even more detrimental to their mental health, with less access to family support than white prisoners ([HMIP, 2020](#)), poorer relationships with prison staff and increased physical isolation in custody (young Black adults are three times more likely to be placed in segregation than their white peers, [HMIP 2021](#)).

'Just because of the colour of my skin, I feel like staff always thought I was up to something, even when I wasn't' (Young man)

Young people tell us that is often the failure of prisons to meet basic social, emotional and physical needs, that contributes to a decline in mental health and increase in disruptive behaviour:

'There's basic things we need, which is food, water, health and fitness, and social connection and all three of them go amiss because people aren't communicating properly, and people are identifying problems but they're just being swept under the rug... prioritising security... There's a lack of care, isn't there, in prisons?... it's just dehumanising what prisoners go through.' (Young man)

'There's so much going against them, so like, you take them out from their communities, you take them away from their families, you put them in this place that's dirty and disgusting, where every day they're being put down and belittled, and then they're surprised when these young men behave violently and are troubled with their mental health.' (Young man)

Young men have reported that there are particular times when young people are more vulnerable to poor mental wellbeing (which can manifest as violent or disruptive behaviour):

- When they first arrive in a new establishment. As the [Chief Medical Officer's review of prisoner health \(2025\)](#) identifies: 'some of the greatest health risks predictably occur during and just after transitions: on arrival in prison; after transfer between prisons and just after release from prison or probation'.

'You're all over the place. Your mind's bouncing here and there. Like, if like, I was on remand, like I never got sentenced from outside so obviously I come to prison straight on remand so I'm thinking, how long am I going to be here? Yeah. Like, I haven't called this person, that person. Like, literally your life's in turmoil. You're in prison. Obviously, it's not a nice place to be. You're a little bit anxious about prison, worried about violence, this and that, money, your family.' (Young man)

- When they are moved to a new Wing away from peers
- When they are sentenced whilst on remand in custody
- Following incidences or threats of violence, confrontation or bullying
- During prolonged periods of lock-up or segregation

'There needs to be a real conversation about how locking young men up for extended periods of time specifically affects their mental health. So, for me like, one of the effects that it had on me is that it made me really anxious and closed off.' (Young man)

- When they miss a particular event in the community, such as birthdays, funerals, celebrations, anniversaries

'Christmas, Easter, birthdays, any kind of celebration... You feel like you're missing out.' (Young man)

- After incidences of self-harm or suicide in the prison community
- Coming up to release

'Approaching your release you get the jitters, everyone gets it, you feel like you're almost comfortable here, like you've done however long you've done and you've got into a routine and now it's the perspective of coming out. Obviously, you want to be out, you want freedom... but it's a bit scary, it's daunting.' (Young man)

- Restricted food – this may be because there has been limited choice available to them or because they didn't hand in their menu sheet.

Young people's developmental maturity

There is clear neurological and psychological evidence that brain development continues into the twenties and while this provides a unique opportunity for change, it also has implications for the appropriate treatment of young adults in custody. For example, young men continually tell us that reward and sanction-based approaches, such as the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, are not effective.

'I've made a conscious decision not to move to the enhanced wing because they're making us jump through hoops to maintain being there. It's too much pressure.'

(Young man)

'If you do something good no one recognises it. If I break up a fight and say 'Sir can I have a positive' some of them will say "you know I don't give positives". So what's the point in doing anything positive then?' (Young man)

The prison workforce

The prison workforce is facing significant challenges including high staff attrition, pressurised workloads, and poor mental & emotional wellbeing, leading to high levels of anxiety & burnout ([Prison Officers' Association, 2021](#)). The number of prison officers in England & Wales who took sick days for mental health reasons nearly doubled in the last five years (MoJ, 2023). The impact of secondary trauma on prison staff must be recognised in order that they can respond effectively to the wellbeing needs of young people and maintain compassionate responses to presenting behaviour.

'They're just faced by hostility day in and day out. There is an ingrained culture of hostility towards prison guards so how could they not feel some kind of hostility?'

(Young man)

Complex needs of young people

- Young people in custody are more likely than their peers to have had multiple **adverse childhood experiences**. In addition, two thirds of young people in custody have been in care, with looked after children four times more likely to experience mental health issues ([LGA, 2023](#)). Trauma can have a significant impact on how young people are able to communicate their needs or regulate their emotions and subsequent behaviour.

'Everything was always dealt with beats. I was beaten for everything, and people wonder why I ended up being a bit violent myself. Everyone's always been, the family, my nan, granddad, mum, aunties, everyone's always beat me... These are things that you're not meant to do to a child, and they traumatise me and as a grown man, I see all the wrongs I'm doing.' (Young man)

- **Young people with neurodivergent and Special Educational Needs (SEN)** are over-represented in the justice system ([HMIP, 2021](#)). There is a strong correlation between neurodiversity and poor mental health, and the prison environment and regime can be particularly challenging, often increasing depression, anxiety, and self-harm (Day, 2021).

'I got ADHD. Once my mind's busy, I'm actually happy. I feel relaxed once my mind is busy. When I'm at my most craziest, that's when I'm relaxed but that's when things can go wrong and I gotta literally keep that in my head.' (Young man)

- It is estimated that almost a third of young adults in custody have an **acquired traumatic brain injury** ([House of Commons, 2016](#)) which can increase risk of mental ill health and hinder typical maturation processes.
- **Young men involved in gangs** are at an increased risk of a range of mental health conditions including: antisocial personality disorder, anxiety, psychosis, depression, post traumatic stress disorder and substance dependence ([Public Health England, 2015](#); [Junenis, 2023](#)).

'[Young adults not involved in crime] are not stressed in the way I'm stressed. Their stress is not my stress, trust me. They don't need to worry about their friends dying or going to jail at any minute or you might get 35 years, or your friend just got 35 years. One just died and they don't know that feeling, waking up everyday paranoid off your head. They don't know the feeling driving through certain areas paranoid... a lot of people don't know that.' (Young man)

- **Black young people are more likely to face multiple and significant risk factors** for poor mental health including: poverty, insecure housing, being victims of crime and discrimination, yet they are less likely to identify as having mental health needs when they arrive in custody ([HMIP, 2022](#)).

'I think you can look at a lot of the issues that's been affecting young Black men... Like historically. And I feel like that a lot of the reason that a lot of these young men have the mental issues that they do is because like of systemic reasons or lack of guidance or all the rest of it.' (Young man)

Key actions in creating a secure environment

Adopt a 'whole prison approach' to wellbeing

Whole prison approaches have been highlighted as critical in promoting good mental health and wellbeing, especially for those with protected characteristics. As the Chief

Medical Officer ([Department of Health and Social Care and MoJ, 2025](#)) identifies: ‘a core principle of a ‘whole prison’ approach is the notion of decency in prisons and a recognition that health promotion is ‘everybody’s business’, not just the responsibility of healthcare staff’. A whole prisons approach goes further than just providing interventions, or training staff – it considers the whole system, including the culture of the organisation.

‘It’s all well and good making staff trauma-informed but if you’re not giving them the time, the resources, the space, the investment into actually being able to affect structural change, all you’re doing is having really skilled, maybe more emotionally intelligent people working in prisons are more aware of how much they’re failing. That’s frustrating. You burn out, you give up, whatever, you leave maybe, or the system isn’t set up for you to succeed.’ (Young man)

Develop regimes, practice and policy that responds to the distinct needs and developmental maturity of young adults.

Young adulthood provides a unique opportunity for change and should be harnessed through approaches that are informed by and responsive to the psychosocial development needs of young people.

Improve access to activities and interventions that promote wellbeing in young people

Young men have told us that more education and activity needs to be provided to promote and maintain the wellbeing of young people in custody. They have told us that activities need to:

- be informed by what young people say they want to engage in/how they want to engage

‘Get suggestions from prisoners to see what they would like to do and try and make it happen. More things that can relate to people, do you get it?’ (Young man)

- be delivered by external agencies who specialise in engaging effectively with young people

‘People from outside agencies need to be let in to be able to help people more, because the people in prison, they’re not able to help. They’re not told to help. They’re

told, do this, secure the door... They don't care about your mental health.' (Young man)

- consider, explore and celebrate young people's intersecting identities – as young people, as men, as parents/family-members and as vulnerable and resilient humans, taking into account culture, faith and ethnicity

'In prison I've noticed so many fathers that have been in the same scenario myself, not being able to see their kids, and that's something I think gets missed a lot... I'm watching somebody else playing with their kid knowing I can't see my kid, so I'm going to go back to the wing and I'm going to be in a bad mood but nobody's really paying attention to me being in a bad mood or why.' (Young man)

- targeted at promoting mental wellbeing, reducing stigma, increasing mental health awareness and promoting help-seeking behaviours

'Prisoners love to train, like physical health but there's no way you can train your mental health.' (Young man)

- promoted in a way that resonates with young men and utilises peer promotion (using terminology and imagery that is inclusive, non-stigmatising and relevant to young people)

'If it was a, you know, 20s white lady who asked me, I'd probably say no. But if someone like one of the oldest on the block was like, yo, yo, do you want to come meditate, it will change your life. I'd be like yeah, cos I trust him cos he's like someone I trust... It's the way it's delivered.' (Young man)

- delivered in psychologically safe environments.

'If you could just have a place where you can take off the mask at least for five minutes, you could go back out and face the world again.' (Young man)

Target support at points of transition

- Ensure support for mental health is available in remand prisons where many young men will be particularly vulnerable.
- Focus on 'building relationships' and provide consistency in relationships leading up to and following transitions
- Manage anxiety amongst young people by providing accessible and meaningful information about 'what to expect', 'how to access support' and 'how to look after your mental wellbeing'.

- Recognise, be compassionate towards and provide support in response to the anxiety, stress and trauma associated with transitions into, out of and within custody.
- Ensure information follows young people on their journey through the criminal justice system to minimise the need to 'retell their story'.

Recognise the role that young people play in creating the solutions

Young people have emphasised the potential that they have in co-developing and co-delivering solutions. In responding to the needs of young Black people specifically, the [Centre for Mental Health \(2022\)](#) states that 'it is essential that mental health programmes are co-designed and co-produced with young people from racialised communities in order to provide them with the best support'. There is also evidence to suggest that peer-led initiatives, such as buddy schemes, Health and Wellbeing Champions (HAWCs), lived experience mentors and peer support groups can be effective and increase trust and engagement in services ([Clinks, 2025](#)).

Support prison staff to respond effectively to young people's mental health needs

Young men emphasise the integral role of prison staff in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of prisoners.

'When you actually get someone like genuine, caring, affectionate, that actually understands us... That's actually what makes a difference, because we can do these systemic changes, but honestly, it's more about those individuals.' (Young man)

To support staff working in prisons to respond effectively to the mental health needs of young men in custody, young people suggest that, alongside effective supervision and support, staff training and professional development opportunities should include:

- the impact of racism on wellbeing, mental health and help-seeking behaviour
- anti-racism and cultural competency
- trauma informed practice (including trauma through the lens of race and racism) and understanding behaviour as communication
- young adults' needs with regards to mental health and emotional wellbeing

- how to promote health and wellbeing in everyday interactions through intentional conversations and relational approaches
- strength based, growth orientated practice that supports young people to recognise and celebrate their own mental strength and resilience.

Spark Inside has delivered coaching to over 200 prison staff, including Governor grades, and has recently published a [review of the coaching programme for prison staff](#), undertaken by the University of Lincoln. Prison staff have told us that coaching can provide valuable support that positively contributes towards job satisfaction, emotional wellbeing, staff morale, improved communication, staff retention and professional development.

'Every session [has] added value to both my personal and professional development whilst enabling me to create a toolkit of skills to refer to and reflect on regularly. My wellbeing has improved as a result of developing strategies to deal with the complexities and dynamic nature of my current role. My leadership has improved through developing new techniques to generate a culture of accountability and self-reflection across my team.' (Deputy Prison Governor in receipt of Spark Inside coaching)