

Life in secure care

A report by the Children's Rights Director for England



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About the Children's Rights Director



Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England

The law sets out my duties as Children's Rights Director for England. One of my main duties is to ask children and young people for their views about how children are looked after in England. This includes children living away from home, and children getting any sort of help from council social care services.

As well as asking children for their views and publishing what they tell us, I and my team also give advice on children's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the Government. We have a duty to raise any issues we think are important about the rights and welfare of children living away from home or getting children's social care support. We do this both for individual children and for whole groups of children.

We have written reports about many things that are important to children and young people in care, being helped by social care services, or living away from home. In many of these we have included the views of young people living in secure units. But we have never written a report that simply says what it is like to live in a secure unit. That is what this report is about. We have visited young people in many different secure units, asking them to tell us in their own words what it is like to live there.

We are also publishing reports about young people's experiences of living in other types of residential care. *Life in children's homes* is about the experiences of children and young people living in children's homes; *Life in residential special schools* is about people's experiences of having both residential care and education in a special school; and *Life in residential further education* is about residential students under 18 in further education colleges. We have already published reports about the experience of being adopted, of living in foster care, of being a boarder in a boarding school, and of life in residential family centres. Because we asked much the same questions of children and young people living in open children's homes as we did of those living in secure units, people will be able to use these reports to compare the experiences of young people living in open and secure children's homes.

For people who know about secure units, or who run or work in them, I hope this report will give a useful picture of how young people across the country see things, so that any particular unit can be checked against it. For people who are not familiar with secure units, including those considering making a placement in one for the first time, and young people being placed in one for the first time, I hope that this report will give a fair picture of what life is like in security.

Like all my reports, this report is being published for everyone to read. You can find copies of all my reports on our website: www.rights4me.org.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Roger Morgan'.

About secure units

Secure units are children's homes that have been specially approved by the Government to 'restrict liberty' – that is, to lock young people inside the home for a period of time. Usually, only young people aged at least 13 can be placed in a secure unit. Special permission from the Secretary of State is needed to place anyone under 13 in a secure unit. A council can only restrict a young person's liberty by placing them in a secure unit if they are likely to injure themselves or someone else if they are placed somewhere else, or if they are likely to run away from anywhere else and then get seriously harmed after running away. Before a young person can be kept by the council in a secure unit for any more than 72 hours, a court has to agree that they are both likely to run away and then likely to be harmed or to injure themselves or someone else. No young person can be kept by the council in a secure unit once these dangers are no longer there, and a court must regularly decide whether or not these dangers have passed.

As well as young people placed by their local council in a secure unit, young people who have committed a serious offence can be placed in a secure unit by the Youth Justice Board (YJB). Secure units are children's homes, not prisons (secure training centres and young offender institutions are different). Most secure units are run by local councils; one is run by a voluntary organisation and one by a company.

Like all children's homes, secure units must look after the rights and welfare of the young people living in them. Some have 'welfare' places for young people placed for their own welfare by the council and 'YJB' places for those placed by the Youth Justice Board after committing a serious offence. We found that young people in secure units usually talked about being either in a 'welfare' or a 'criminal' placement, and saw these as being very different.

There are 18 secure units in England. For this report, we visited nine of those units, chosen at random, and spoke directly to the young people in each unit to ask them for their experience of living in security.



How we asked for young people's views

When we visited each secure unit, we met the young people living there as a group. We asked them to tell us their experience of living in security, going through a set of questions which covered each of the main headings in this report. One member of our team led the discussion, while another team member took notes. We asked the same questions in each group, although of course the discussions then developed in different ways.

Each discussion was different. Sometimes a member of the unit staff sat in on our discussions for safety reasons, but mostly we met the young people without staff members present. In one unit we talked over lunch with the young people, enjoying a meal they had chosen for the occasion. In another, we met the young people in two separate groups. In three units, as well as speaking to young people in a group, two of us also spoke to a young person who wanted to talk to us on their own. Where we met with a large group, we also gave each young person a copy of our discussion questions on paper, so that they could choose whether to say their views during the group discussion, or write their views down on the paper to hand in to us afterwards, or say some things and write others. We helped with the writing if the young person wanted us to.

In this report, we have set out the young people's views just as they gave them to us. We have not left out any views that we might disagree with, nor made our own comments on anything the young people told us. We have not added our own views or ideas, nor those of the many secure unit staff we met. Of course some views were about the particular unit a person was in at the time, and we have not left these out, but we found that young people had very similar views on most things in most secure units.

'At this moment
I'm unpredictable'

The best of living in a secure unit

In all our discussion groups, we started by asking young people to tell us what were the best things, and what were the worst things, about living in a secure unit. They later came back to many of these things in more detail when discussing other questions, so this section of the report gives their overview of the best and worst sides of being in security.

Some young people spoke about their experience of living in a particular secure unit, but some had been in two or more units and were able to compare what it was like in different units. One young person had spent six different periods in security, in three different units.

Those who had been in more than one unit told us that each unit was run very differently. This was usually to do with the way different staff groups worked, what they allowed and what they didn't allow. It was also to do with whether most young people were 'welfare' placements, or 'criminal' placements, and if the unit had both, how the mix worked out.

Most young people told us that a secure unit was, for them, **a safe place to be, and that it kept them out of trouble and helped them to sort themselves out.** One young person, summarising what many others said, told us that in security you can 'sort yourself out knowing you are safe'. Others said: 'you realise what you have been doing'; 'you're safe and can't get into trouble', and 'being locked in a secure unit is good because you can't do things'. As another person put it: 'If you've had a shitty time, you come in here and are safe, people look after you.' Some told us they also felt **safe from other people who would try to harm them if they were outside;** in a secure unit, 'no one can get you'. One person summed up how, for them, security both kept them out of trouble but also took away their freedom: 'Used to do what got you into trouble, but now you can't do what you want.'

Because loss of freedom was so important to so many young people, the **times when they could leave the unit under staff supervision on 'mobility' visits, to prepare for the time they left the unit altogether, was very much valued.** One group explained to us that very few people abuse their 'mobilities' and try to run away, because they are so important to the young person. Different groups told us that if anybody were to run away while on a mobility visit, they would feel vulnerable, unable to cope and unsafe.

Some talked very positively about the **support they got to help them sort themselves out.** 'You get help dealing with things.' A few said that **being in security sometimes means you have to wait for outside help** if it would mean leaving the unit, such as visiting an optician. We heard that **reward schemes for progress** help you make improvements in behaviour (such as 'band' schemes, in which young people earn more privileges as they move up to a higher 'band' for making progress). Some pointed out that these points schemes depend on the young person getting enough support from staff to keep up their progress, as well as just being able to earn better privileges. Others spoke of how, in their unit, problems were often sorted out by being **discussed in a group meeting or forum.** One told us that being in the secure unit had opened up new opportunities for them. A few said that living with staff and other young people in a small secure group was being 'like a family', although at the same time 'you find out how much you want to be with your family'.

'You're safe and can't get into trouble'

As well as seeing progress and reward schemes as helpful, discussions also led to some criticisms of how particular schemes worked. Some schemes took **a long time to build up privileges like having CDs, television and your own bedding, but privileges could be lost completely after one incident.** People thought that the schemes would be better if privileges could be earned more quickly and not lost so suddenly. Others discussed whether having your own TV was something that everyone should have as a right from the start, even though they could lose it for bad behaviour, rather than having to earn it as a privilege after a long time. Still others discussed the **importance of music to teenagers,** even in helping them to calm down and get to sleep, and thought that having their own music should also be something everyone had rather than something you had to earn as a privilege. Some suggested that pocket money could be given and linked to progress. A few told us they thought there was too much pressure to cope and to keep improving themselves, and that ‘sometimes they expect too much of you’.

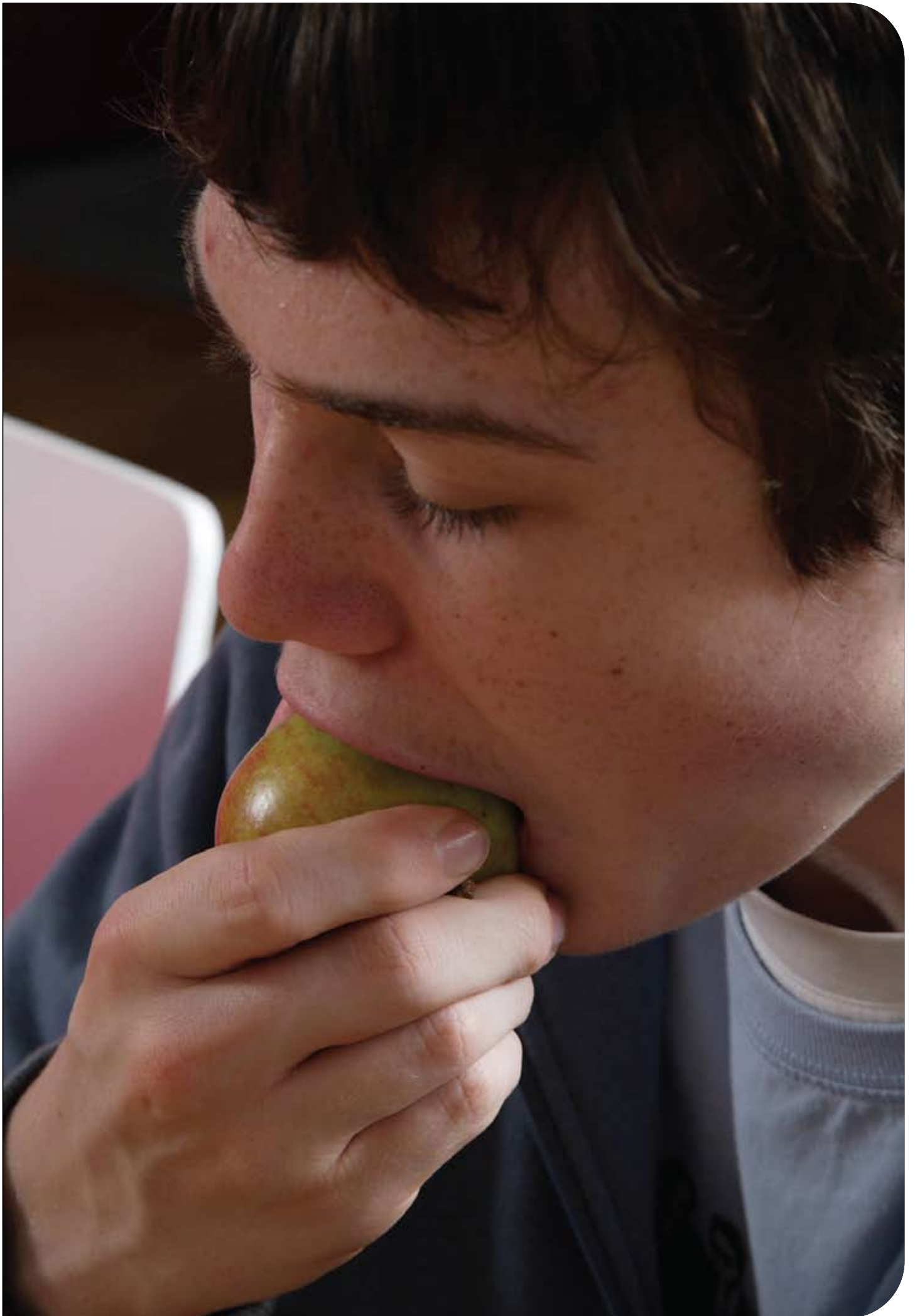
We heard in most of our discussion groups that **the other people in the secure unit with you made all the difference to whether being there was a good or a bad experience.** As one person told us, the best thing about a unit can be the ‘people in it’. **Staff who support you and who you get on with can make a huge difference.** Some thought there were too many staff around, while others thought there were not enough in their units to give everyone the support they needed. Just as staff probably wanted to have a break from the young people sometimes, it was just as true that ‘sometimes you need a break from the staff’. It was also very important how you got on with the other young people in the unit, and how much their problems affected you. Most discussion groups told us that it is **good to socialise with the other young people,** to ‘make friends safely’, and to feel able to share things with others: ‘you kind of connect with them because they’ve been through similar things’. Meeting new people in the unit can be very positive. But people also told us that seeing just the same faces every day can be a big problem if you don’t get on with someone else. Living with people you don’t like or don’t get on with could be the worst thing about security for some people.

In some discussion groups, young people told us that they found the **bedrooms and accommodation in their secure unit the best thing about it.** This was because you have your own room, where you can be safely alone if you need to be, with its own en suite toilet and shower. A few young people had been to young offender institutions in the past and said that, compared to these, secure units had more space, freedom and privileges. People in secure units were still locked up though, the same as in young offender institutions, and so, as one person put it: ‘This ain’t no prison but you ain’t allowed out so it may as well be.’

Having **activities** to do was one of the most usual ‘best things’ about living in secure units. Most popular was football, but other games, using computers and having a gym were also often quoted as best things. For some, simply having **free time** was the best thing, especially at weekends. Some liked the routine with plenty to do, others liked having free time, and still others liked being able to play their own choice of music in their bedrooms. Some people told us about very specific things they thought were especially good about their secure unit. In some units, people told us there were good activities, but there were not many different things to choose from.

Food was quoted as both a good thing and a bad thing by different groups. People liked having a wide choice of food, and of course having food they liked, and talked about these as best things about their unit. Others thought the food in their unit was generally poor. Some said it was bad that they were not allowed to eat as many sweets or as much chocolate as they were used to having outside, although one group said they agreed that people in secure units shouldn’t be given chocolate as it might make them ‘hyper’.

Education was another thing that was quoted by different people as either a good or bad thing about security. Some saw the teaching and the chance to get GCSEs as a good thing for them; others thought there was too much education, particularly during what would otherwise have been school holiday times, or when they were old enough to leave school.



The worst of living in a secure unit

The most usual worst thing we heard about being in a secure unit was the **loss of freedom and being locked up. Being in a secure unit stops you from doing things and takes you away from your family and friends.** Some examples of what young people said are: 'can't go outside'; 'locked doors and constant banging of doors'; 'being trapped behind big fences'; 'getting locked in your room'; 'being locked up far away from friends and family'; 'can't do things for yourself'. It also meant that 'you can't just walk away' from anything that happens in the unit. One view was that the rules, control and routine made people feel younger than they actually were: 'This place makes you feel young.' We often heard life in security described as **boring, and for some, likely to make them depressed.** Among the things people told us were worst about being in security was **not being able to do many of the little things teenagers normally do** together. Because of the need to prevent problems developing between young people, many said they were not allowed to have private conversations with other young people without staff checking up on them, nor to sit close to each other on a settee, go into each other's rooms, borrow or lend things, or, in a girls' unit, to do each other's makeup or hair. 'You lose points if you hug each other or do each other's hair.' In mixed gender units, many said that the rules of security prevented much **mixing between the genders.** Many felt the absence of mobile phones.

It can be a problem if **you get affected when other young people, perhaps people younger or newer than you are, lose control and 'kick off'.** Some said that everyone else lost staff support every time a young person 'kicked off' and had to be dealt with and taken out of the situation by staff. **Being restrained** themselves was one of the worst things about security for some young people. For others the worst thing was **having things taken from them for safety** when they were taken to their room after they lost control: 'The clothes and stuff in my room are taken away when I kick off.'

For many, the worst thing about security was the different **safety rules** that made a big difference to normal behaviour. One person gave us the example that 'you can't put a quilt over you', as this was seen as possibly dangerous. Others said that they felt very **limited in their choice of clothing** because of rules about what was accepted in the unit. Some found that particular **words they were used to using outside were not allowed** in the unit. One person said they were 'not allowed to say words from where I am from'.

Having a lot of supervision in the unit also meant that there was not much privacy. It was **difficult to talk on the phone in private,** and staff were able to **watch you through observation windows** and might see you undressed; some thought staff could also see them using the toilet or showering.

Rules and routines suited some people but not others. Some saw the routines as a good thing, others said they were one of the worst things about security. The one rule that was most often disliked was **not being allowed to smoke.** For some, this was a sudden and big change from what they did before they came to the unit. The most unpopular routine was **having to go to bed earlier, and get up earlier,** than most had been used to. Some wanted young people to be consulted more about some of the rules and how they might work.

Finally in this part of our discussions, one group of young women told us that their main bad experience to do with security was not in their secure unit at all, but during **escorted travel to and from the unit.** They said that there had been a major and very embarrassing security problem, with different escorts making different rules about supervising them when they had needed to go to the toilet at motorway services on the journey.

Advice for any future secure unit

We asked each of our discussion groups to tell us what advice they would give to someone setting up a new secure unit, and how it should be different from their present unit.

One group decided that their present unit was already the best it could be, and said they would advise making any new unit the same as theirs: **'Ain't gonna get no better than this.'**

A major suggestion was making **more use of supervised trips out of the unit**, or 'mobilities'. Young people thought this helped them get used to the world outside the unit so that they were less likely to have problems when they left security. Discussion groups thought units should all have a programme of gradually increasing time out of the unit, including outings to activities, to earn trust and, through that, more mobility opportunities so that they could 'earn way into open unit'.

Other groups discussed what sort of building a future secure unit should have. By far the most usual suggestion was that it should **have more space inside, with all the rooms being bigger than they are in many existing secure units**. Some thought that beds should also be bigger than is usual at present. Another suggestion was that the **heating should be easier to control in each room, and the building, especially bedrooms, should not be so hot**, since in security you usually cannot cool rooms down by opening the windows.

Some groups proposed that there should be **less restriction on moving around inside a future secure unit**, with more inside doors left unlocked if it was safe enough to do so. They would want young people to be able to **go into the secure yard more easily** if they wanted to get outside. One group said that nobody in a new unit should have to ask to be let out of a room simply to visit the toilet.

One discussion group was concerned at how far some young people are from home and their families once in a secure unit, and thought that **future secure units should be more local to where young people come from**, and will be returning to.

Although some thought there should be fewer cameras keeping watch in any future secure unit, because of privacy, more thought that **a new unit should have just as many, and possibly more, cameras**. The main reason for this was that people could easily be accused of things in a secure unit, and **having what happened recorded on camera would be the main way of proving your innocence** if you were wrongly accused of something. This was very important if your privileges depended on it. One person told us: 'There is one camera, but none on the unit, so staff go with who they want to believe. If you're going to have a camera you should have them in all areas, not just one area. I want cameras to prove stuff I didn't do.' It would therefore be important for young people to be able to ask to see camera records of incidents they might have been involved in. Only one person in all our groups said they thought having cameras was the worst thing about the building they were living in.

There were many suggestions for **relaxing the rules and routines** in any future secure unit. These included allowing young people to go into each other's rooms and being allowed more of the usual teenage contacts between young people, having later bedtimes, being trusted to make phone calls in private after the first few calls were supervised, longer time limits on phone calls, being allowed to wear jewellery and more choice of clothing. Many thought a future unit should allow young people to smoke.

Some groups discussed the idea of having **more risk assessment to decide what could, and could not, be safely allowed**. Suggestions were that young people entering a new secure unit should be put into different groups according to a risk assessment before they came in, so that how tight or relaxed the rules and routines were could then differ between groups having different levels of risk. Another suggestion was that all the rules for safety and security should be based on the level of risk and changed as risk assessments changed. One group decided that, at present, 'a lot of the rules are just in case rules'.

Another point made about rules at present was that they vary from one staff member to another, and **sometimes not everyone (staff or young people) seems to know exactly what all the rules are.** One discussion group in particular said that in any future unit it was vital that ‘all stick to the same rules’, by having an agreed rule book.

Although young people generally thought a new unit should be flexible over many rules, they did not think this should apply to rules about when physical restraint could, and could not, be used. Our discussion groups were clear that **young people in security do ‘kick off’ and need to be restrained to prevent them injuring themselves or someone else, or doing serious damage to the building or furniture,** but thought this was the one area where the rules for any new unit could not be left unclear or flexible. One young person’s view was typical of the views of others: ‘You should get restrained if you attack staff, but not for refusing to go to your room, if you argue or push a chair over in a temper, like happens.’ Another group suggested that any future rules should cover safe restraint for young people with medical problems such as asthma.

There was a general view in our discussions that **younger people are likely to ‘kick off’ more often than older ones.** But younger ones ‘kicking off’ in turn made older people more likely to do this. This led to the suggestion that, in a new unit, there should be a **separation of different age groups,** because ‘mature people get sick and tired of people kicking off’. This would not be easy though, as ‘there can be different levels of maturity in a group’.

‘Ain’t gonna get no better than this’

The question of **mixing ‘welfare’ people (placed in security for their own welfare by their local council) and ‘criminal’ people (placed in security through the Youth Justice Board after committing a serious offence)** was raised by the young people in many of our discussions. Generally, young people thought that in future there should be **separate units for these two different sorts of placement, because their needs were different:** ‘should be two different units for the welfare and the criminals’; ‘welfare are more needy, it shouldn’t be mixed because they are here for different reasons’; ‘if you are here on welfare, you haven’t done anything bad’. It was not helpful to those placed for welfare reasons to be involved in discussions about trying to stop committing offences. Some young people thought that giving secure places to people with welfare needs who hadn’t committed a serious offence meant that there was a shortage of secure places for Youth Justice Board placements.

Another view was that we ‘need secure units for YJB but welfare should be somewhere else’; ‘secure units should just be for those who commit crimes and they shouldn’t have privileges’. According to this view, ‘people who have problems in the community should deal with it in the community because being put in here is escaping the problem’.

One young person had been placed in one secure unit for welfare reasons, and in another after committing a serious crime. That person was clear that, from their own experience, people placed for those different reasons should not be mixed in the same unit in future. They thought that those placed after an offence saw the unit as like being in a prison for their offence, while someone being placed for welfare reasons could become ‘institutionalised and frightened to be out’ unless there were special welfare secure units.

There were two areas in which young people thought any new unit needed to make sure it was going to do well. One was **education, which should offer good teaching and practical work skills, but should be fun, not be too much and not be too boring.** The other was **spare time activities, where there would need to be a wide range and good choice.**

Rating security

We asked young people in some of our discussion groups to tell us whether a secure unit was the right place for them to be at the time of our visit. We also asked them to rate how well they were being looked after in the secure unit.

Thirty-nine young people told us whether they thought they should be in a secure unit. The chart shows their answers.

Is a secure unit the right place for you at the moment?



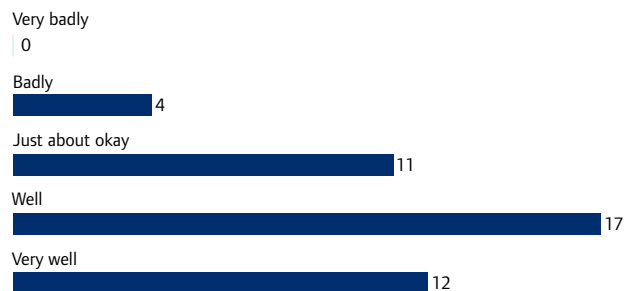
The young people who answered this question had mixed views about whether security was the right place for them. **Nineteen thought security was not the right place for them, and 15 thought it was the right place.**

Young people gave us their reasons for their answers.

Those who thought security was the right place for them told us about how it helped them and kept them out of trouble: ‘cos I’d be causing trouble on the out’; ‘at this moment I’m unpredictable. My head’s not straight at this moment’; ‘it keeps me safe and helps me’. **Others said being in security was simply the fair result of doing a crime:** ‘I did the crime so I have to do the time.’ Some of those who did not think security was the right place for them either thought it was not helping them (‘I don’t feel security works for me’), or that it was too great a punishment for what they had done: ‘I’m not a criminal at all – it was my first offence.’ **Most of those who thought security was not the right place said so because they thought it had been the right place for them, but they felt ready to leave security now:** ‘I’m ready to leave and feel I won’t run away again’; ‘I can see my futures and people have been helping me and now I think I’m ready to go.’

Forty-four young people gave us their ratings of how well they thought they were being looked after in their secure unit. Their ratings are shown in the next chart.

How well are you being looked after in the unit?



Clearly, most who answered our question thought they were being well looked after in security. **Twenty-nine of the 44 told us they were being looked after well or very well, and only four young people said they were being looked after badly.** Giving their reasons, young people who said they were being looked after well talked positively of the staff (‘staff are wicked!’) and of the help they were getting: ‘the staff and young people’s help are both reasonable’; ‘it’s trying to change me so I can stop doing what got me here in the first place’. One young person, realising that they had given the top score to both their need for security and how they were being looked after, added the comment ‘it’s true!’ to us.

Buildings that are secure

We asked young people in our discussion groups to tell us the best and worst things about the secure buildings they were living in. Many said **the building was good because it was secure and safe**, but some commented on things like fences (**'black fences'**) where these were easily seen from inside the unit (units did differ on how much fencing there was to be seen). **Being able to see a view from the unit was important:** 'you can see outside through the fence'; 'you can feel safe and see out'.

A major issue, as we have already noted, was the size of rooms. Some told us they liked a particular unit, or a particular part of a unit, because it had good-sized rooms. **Most told us that they found the rooms, including bedrooms and lounges, too small:** 'all crammed up'. This also meant less privacy for everyone. Being locked up in a small space made people feel worse about not being able to get out.

The other major issue raised in many groups was their **dislike of living in a building where the windows couldn't be opened for ventilation.** We were told that this made some places smelly, and too hot on hot days. 'We should have windows we can open coz it's choking'; 'vents are needed'; 'it's crap because it's recycled air'.

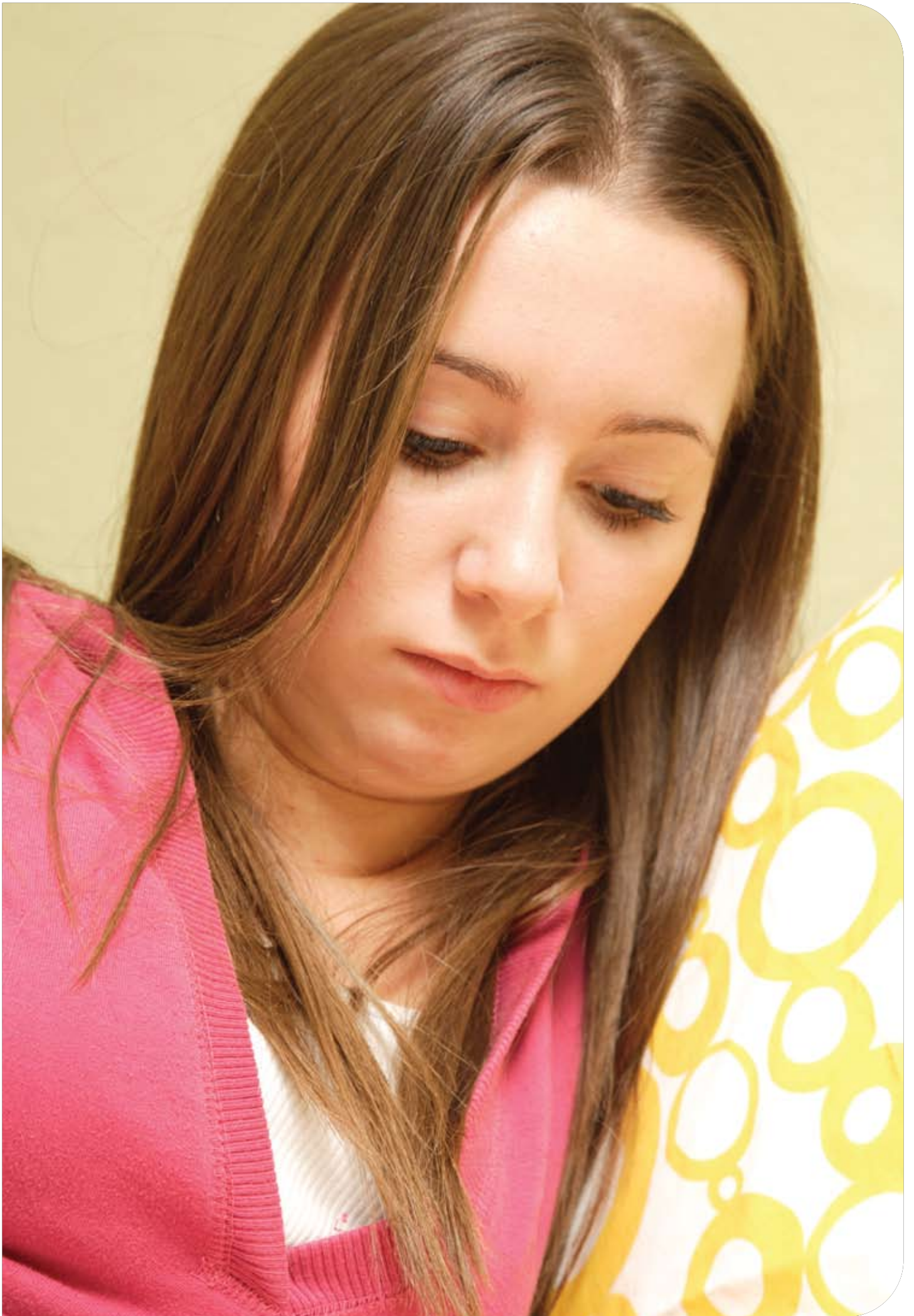
As we have heard, **having a bedroom to yourself** was important to most people, and this was repeated as one of the best things about most units, especially having an ensuite toilet and shower too. In some units, being able to decorate your own room was also quoted as a best thing about the building. Only one person told us they didn't like having their own room, because they preferred to be in a young offender institution: 'In a YOI it's 2 up so it's better and you don't get bored.'

Some told us the layout of their unit was good, especially if this had **connecting doors that allowed different groups (particularly boys and girls) to be able to mix together**, or if it had a room to go to away from others but near to the group's lounge.

The position of the secure unit and what buildings were near to it mattered to some groups. Some had been surprised by **how close their unit was to ordinary houses.** This could make them feel even worse about being locked up. They also thought the unit 'looks daunting', and whenever they did go out everyone living nearby could see that they came from the secure unit: 'They get the wrong idea of you – people know it is a secure unit when you walk out.' One person told us they 'thought it was going to be in the middle of nowhere', not among houses.

We were told many particular things about each unit. Examples were uncomfortable mattresses, lack of water pressure in the showers, parts of some units being especially either hot or cold most of the time, toilets not being very good, or it taking a long time to get something repaired. There were plenty of examples of good things too, for example noticing that even small rooms don't smell, having a big visiting room, a cooking room, a good gym, and the building always being clean and tidy. How homely a unit felt was important to many – and there was general agreement that while secure units have to have safe furniture, beanbags would be both safe and homely.

'It's trying to change me so I can stop doing what got me here in the first place'



Staff in security

We have already heard that the staff looking after young people in a secure unit can make the difference between life in security being a good or bad experience. All our groups told us that their **staff group included some good, and some not so good, staff**: ‘Some bad staff, but the majority are all right.’ We asked young people to give us examples of what made a person a good or bad staff member for young people in security.

Putting together the views of all the groups, **a good member of staff according to the young people was someone with a good sense of humour so you can have a laugh with them, who is laid back, friendly, joins in activities with young people, is on the side of the young people ‘partly or completely’ (‘she sticks up for you’), someone who is a good listener (‘nice staff to talk to’), not aggressive or bossy, and who can talk calmly and not shout even when things are going badly.** Young people told us that they find it difficult to talk with and trust staff who often shout at them. One group identified some staff they thought deserved medals, but also thought that staff who are not permanent are often better with the young people than ones who have worked in the unit a long time.

Here are some examples of positive things said about staff.

‘You feel confident when you speak to staff’

‘They are better than I thought they would be’

‘They don’t treat you like you’re just a job’

‘They care’

‘Don’t treat us like thugs’

‘They keep you on the straight and narrow’

‘Treat us like their own kids, but with rules’

Young people also gave us examples of what they thought made a bad member of staff. **Staff who were seen as unfair, having favourites and having bad moods were usually seen as bad members of staff**: ‘Some staff are always ratty.’ Generally, staff were not seen as good **if they didn’t support young people but concentrated on just keeping control**: ‘There’s staff who just come to work to tell people what to do coz they’ve got the keys.’ **Staff who looked down on young people** in the unit were disliked and not trusted: ‘patronising, they talk down to you’. Staff were also **disliked if they didn’t listen to young people’s points of view but assumed the worst of them**: ‘They automatically assume that you are doing the wrong thing.’

There were three particular things that young people didn’t like staff doing. One was carrying on **judging young people according to an offence they had committed, rather than helping them for the future**: ‘Some judge you for your offence. Some understand your offence and help support you.’ The second was **seeming to ‘wind young people up’**: ‘Some wind you up just to see how far they can push you then leave you to calm down just to see how you can cope with it.’ The third was **staff doing or saying anything that reminded young people that they were locked up and couldn’t see their own families or do things that others could do outside**. This happened sometimes when staff talked about their own families, for example ‘that they’re going to their mum’s for dinner and make you feel bad’. It also happened when staff came into the unit smelling of cigarettes, which reminded young people that they could not smoke as they had done outside.

Young people also thought **the worst staff did a lot of threatening, and sometimes overreacted to small problems.** Some might say things like ‘the first time you cock up you’re going to your room and we’ll take your telly off you’, and give major sanctions for small incidents or for just being silly (‘they make little things into big things’). On the other hand, **young people did want staff to keep a close eye on what was going on and to stop real problems developing:** ‘some could be more vigilant’; ‘sometimes staff leave you on your own longer than they said they would’.

Most of what young people told us was about some staff getting things very right, and others getting them wrong. They did not tell us many things, particularly negative things, that they thought applied to staff in general. As we have heard, staff not always working to the same rules as each other was seen as a problem, and this was behind a lot of the comments young people made to us. Along with this, though, **young people wanted staff to treat them as individuals, fairly and to the same rules, but not to treat everyone the same way, because people were at different stages and had different problems.**

We heard that **entering a secure unit for the first time can be a scary experience.** One person told us: ‘The first time I went from being searched to being with young people.’ It was suggested that it would be better if young people could get to know some staff members first, before joining the group of young people already in the unit, especially if they had arrived in an emotional state: ‘The length of time should depend on your emotional state.’

Young people differed in whether they thought there were enough staff – or too many – in their units. Most agreed that staff were unable to give everyone enough attention when they were coping with someone behaving badly, and a few said that staffing sometimes got noticeably lower during holiday times.

One last comment, from more than one group, needs to be recorded. Young people felt that when someone from the outside visited the unit, as a visitor or to check up on how it was being run, what staff said always overpowered the views of the young people, and that staff acted differently in front of the visitor from the way they usually acted. Young people thought visitors should talk most with the young people in the unit.



Safety and dangers in security

Another of our discussion questions asked young people for their views on what the main dangers were in a secure unit, and what kept them safe from these dangers. A few told us they didn't think there were any particular dangers to themselves in a secure unit, and one said the only danger they had come across was getting 'astroturf burns' during activities.

Some spoke about **dangers from other young people in the unit** 'if someone kicks off and goes for you'. This could be worse in a secure unit than in other places: 'A secure unit is more dangerous, at least you can run out of the door in a kids' home.' In a secure unit you are 'safe from outsiders but not insiders'. **Bullying ('being targeted') was a possibility, although more people saw 'kicking off' as a bigger danger than bullying.**

In a secure unit, people knew that **others in the unit could be dangerous** people. Some worried that they could be locked up with violent people: 'I could be living with murderers and rapists.' Although this was a worry, **young people did not tell us they had experienced being violently attacked in security. Staff protected them as soon as anyone in the group started 'kicking off'.**

Others thought that the main danger was from themselves, such as the **risk of self-harming**: 'If you are here for welfare, the biggest risk is probably yourself.' There could be **dangers to their mental health**. Some told us they still managed to self-harm, and 'you can get depressed really easily'. Some could also learn bad things from other young people.

Running away was not seen as a risk: 'What's the point of running away – you just get brought back and you lose all your good work.'

The danger we heard about most was young people becoming afraid to leave the security of the unit: 'Gettin' institutionalised'; 'get used to being locked up. Don't want to leave'; 'people wanting to stay in secure'. Some groups spoke about how people would end up 'going out, getting into trouble, so they end up coming back'. We were told personal stories about how it was hard to move on after being in a secure unit, and 'starting again'. One young person told us how they had committed a further offence deliberately to get themselves back into security where they felt safe.

The main things keeping people safe in security were the fact of being locked up and closely supervised by staff, together with being able to talk things through with staff. The two words used most often to describe what keeps people safe were 'talking' and 'staff': 'You are never alone without a member of staff.' Staff kept up a '24/7' watch over things, and stopped anyone 'kicking off' from injuring other people.

'A secure unit is more dangerous, at least you can run out of the door in a kids' home'

Bullying

We heard that **although bullying was not a major problem in secure units, it did still happen**. We asked young people what stopped bullying happening or developing into a bigger problem. The three things we were most often told about were **staff supervising and dealing with bullying quickly, talking things through and, if necessary, someone being removed to their room for a short period of separation**. Staff supervision might not always be popular ('they stare at you and earwig your conversation'), but it was usually effective in keeping bullying down: 'staff are always keeping an eye on everyone'; 'they don't allow bullying'.

Even though most told us that talking things through was important, some said they didn't like the way they sometimes found themselves forced to sit down with a bully to resolve things. They would prefer staff to keep monitoring things especially closely once the bully had been identified, and if needs be to intervene or separate the bully from the group.

Most young people spoke about staff intervention stopping bullying, but a few thought it was also important that individual young people could stick up for themselves or move away from any bullying. 'Stand up for yourself' – but you could also 'keep yourself to yourself' to avoid trouble.

We were given some other examples of things that worked against bullying. These included keeping a **'bullying log'**, **having cameras around the unit, and taking away opportunities for bullying by rules** like allowing only one young person in the corridor at a time, or not allowing people to sit close enough to whisper threats. It was also suggested that more could be done by thinking about the mix of people in any particular group, avoiding bringing very vulnerable young people into the unit, and avoiding putting younger and older young people together.

Some thought that some bullying would always happen, even though watching staff would deal with it very quickly: 'if people want to bully somebody, they can bully somebody'; 'if bullying is going to happen, it will happen. You just have to wait till they leave'. It would always be a risk in a group that had to live closely together, where everyone had their own problems and 'most people wouldn't choose to hang around with the people they're living with'. One person said that bullying could happen when 'we don't mean to – we're just angry'.

We heard from some that although staff are good at spotting and dealing with bullying, they **sometimes make the wrong assumption about who started a bullying incident**. According to the view of one discussion group, 'If you're bigger in stature, then it's your fault – you can't disagree with staff coz they punish you.'

'Staff are always keeping an eye on everyone'

Education in security

There were two very common views about education in secure units. One was that **it helps to make the time pass more quickly**: ‘makes time go fast’; ‘another day of your order gone’. The other was that it was a **good thing in itself**: ‘I love education.’ Some who had not had the opportunity for much education in the past thought it was good that they became involved in it again: ‘helping a Traveller without much experience of school life get involved in education’; ‘catching up on years of missed education’. Having the chance to get some GCSEs was welcomed by some.

The most helpful things about education were **helpful staff and good teachers**: ‘The teachers understand.’ Young people spoke very positively about teachers who made learning fun, and where ‘staff try and sort it out if you’re wound up’ over something you were trying to learn. **Not having to travel anywhere to get to school** was seen as a good thing by some. One group told us that they could stay in bed until 8am and still get down the corridor in time for school.

Many told us about how they tried themselves to make the best of their education while in security, concentrating, listening and working. This was not easy for many of the young people: ‘I’m not used to going to school’; ‘I don’t do well in education’.

On the negative side, we heard that **the biggest problem about education was when it was disrupted by someone ‘kicking off’ in the class**, or bringing with them into school some problem they had been having back in the living unit. This disrupted things and caused others to become difficult too. Sometimes young people would wind each other up, which could spoil the lesson: ‘There’s an annoying kid in my group and I have trouble in education and I have always done.’ **Some said that their teachers were not so good and made things boring.**

Many thought that there was **too much education**: ‘The first four lessons are OK, but then the young people feel bored.’ People resented having school work at weekends in some units, or, in some units, having school when schools outside were on a break or a holiday. Some were bored by being taught things they had learned before outside the unit. Some told us that they had found that if they stayed in security for long enough, their school work got repeated.

‘The first four lessons are OK, but then the young people feel bored’

Hobbies and activities

We asked young people what hobbies or activities they did in their secure units, and what other activities they couldn't do but would have wanted to do.

We received a **long list of activities people did already**. The most frequent was **football**, followed by gym activities, art work, badminton, personal training, circuit training, craft work and rounders. There were many more that individuals did in particular units. People told us there was a lot to do: 'loads of stuff'; 'good activities that young people are happy with'.

Some were concerned that **some activities they wanted to do were linked into the points system and counted as privileges**. One group told us that it was bad luck if your chosen activity involved music, because **listening to music** in your room and having extras like a drum kit had to be earned by good behaviour, and could easily be lost for bad behaviour, which was not true for many other activities. One young person told us: 'The best way for me to calm down is to listen to music, but because you've kicked off they take it off you which makes it worse, it's Catch 22 really.' Sometimes people felt that they had to choose to do particular activities because they could earn privilege points by doing them, rather than because they liked them: 'I hate football but I have to play it to get the points.' Some told us that there are often more activities suitable for boys than there are for girls.

The most popular of the activities that young people would have liked to do but were not able to do were swimming, trampolining, ice skating, horse riding, rugby, weightlifting, bowling and fishing. Young people were clear that doing many of these was not possible because they would need to leave the unit to do them. Some said they were not so interested in exactly what activities they did, but in doing something they liked with people they wanted to be with, **being able to mix more with other people** and, in mixed units, in activities that boys and girls could take part in together.

Use of weights was the subject of much discussion in some groups. We were told that young people thought they were not allowed weights in case they used them as weapons. Most thought that this was not the real reason, because they could equally use other things that they were allowed as weapons if they really wanted to: 'We could use other stuff to chuck at people, but we don't.' In one group, one young person pointed out that they could just as easily find something in the room to use as a weapon if they wanted to: 'He can stab me with a pen if he wants.'

Spending time outside the building in a yard area was something that our groups had mixed feelings about. Some liked doing outdoor activities there, like football and other ball games. But in some units this was dangerous because people had hurt themselves on concrete surfaces and football had been stopped. Some people wanted to be able to get out into the fresh air on their own when they wanted to, without always having to be with staff ('you don't want to go with just staff'), but others did not see any point to that: 'We go outside but it's boring.'



Health

As good health is one of the Every Child Matters outcomes for all children and young people, we asked those in secure units what they thought helped them, and what they thought stopped them, from being healthy there.

Good diet and exercise were the two main things young people thought helped to keep them healthy while in security. 'Healthy eating and exercise' meant **'you have no choice but to be healthy'**. The diet in secure units had few sweets and plenty of fruit and vegetables: 'With every meal we get salad.' People didn't have opportunities to eat or drink bad food or to take lots of unhealthy snacks. Many said they craved for little things they were not allowed in the unit, like chocolate and Mars bar cake, greasy fried food, and oil on their vegetables. Exercise came from the sporting activities organised for young people, such as football, and also from using the gym and having personal training.

As well as diet and exercise, we heard from some groups that **regular health checks and nursing care** helped them to stay healthy.

On the other hand, things young people thought stopped them being healthy while in secure units were also to do with diet and exercise. People told us they were often bored, and therefore **'you just eat and eat because there is nothing else to do'**. Although exercise was organised in the unit, there were **limits to how much exercise you could get** and what you could do. People in secure units didn't get the chance to go walking anywhere, which was an important sort of exercise. There were sometimes not enough staff to supervise people to go outside in the yard, so you couldn't exercise outside. Some thought that the food could be bad for you as well as good. Some was fatty, and there were often plenty of desserts. In most units we heard that regular meals at set times were seen as a healthy thing, but in one unit young people thought that they had supper too near to bedtime and said they found it hard to get to sleep on a full stomach.

Again, some people spoke of **risks to their mental health rather than their physical health**. Living in a secure unit could be stressful and 'it's hard not to kick off'. One person said: 'I didn't punch walls or self-harm before I came in here.' Some told us they were taking drugs or smoking heavily before coming into security. Stopping this suddenly when they arrived was like 'going cold turkey' and this made them likely to behave badly.

'You have no choice but to be healthy'



Preparing for life after security

Finally, we asked our discussion groups what preparation they were getting for leaving security, which we knew some thought would be very hard. We also asked what they were looking forward to most on leaving, and whether there was anything that worried them about leaving security. We already knew that many felt safe in security and were worried that they would find it difficult to cope once they left the unit and might go back to their old ways.

By far **the most common thing that people told us helped them to prepare for leaving security was going out with staff supervision on 'mobilities'**. This was especially helpful when the time spent out of the unit gradually increased as the time to leave came closer and staff supervision lessened.

Particular staff helped most people, including key workers and sometimes workers like 'Connexions' staff from outside the unit. **Staff 'help you sort everything out for when you get out'**. The help included discussions about what people needed to know and what they wanted to do; one-to-one therapeutic sessions and advice about problems, drug safety and medical issues; arranging home visits; organising family counselling; giving a 'help pack' of information; help with filling in forms; and giving independence training. Most thought they were getting help, but some were worried they would need more: **'I am getting some help but not as much as I want.'**

Others told us that **progressing up the points system helped them towards leaving**, as this often included learning skills like cooking – as one person told us: 'If you are on band 2 you make muffins.' Practising doing chores also prepared you: 'chores for independence'.

For some, **having their next placement sorted out and being able to visit it** helped greatly. Having a college place or work placement arranged was vital for others. One young person told us their employer had kept their old job open for them ready for when they came out.

Young people in security for committing a serious offence told us that they felt that people there on welfare grounds had more help to prepare for leaving, and could leave in more gradual steps. If you had committed an offence, you were 'dying to get out but have to do our time'.

We were also given some suggestions for making it easier for young people as they left security. One was that **staff should stay longer with them outside the unit on their day of departure, to offer any last minute help or advice** that was needed. 'You either get picked up or dropped off by staff. Staff stay about half an hour. It would be better if they stayed a bit longer and you had more time to explore where you are going to be.' Another was that **moving into a semi-independent unit, supervised and supported by staff but no longer secure, would help many to 'make it' after leaving security.**

The top three things young people told us they were looking forward to most once they left security were smoking, being with their family again and being back with their friends. Just having freedom came next: 'just being out'; 'seeing outside world again'. For many, there was the challenge of doing better than before once they were back outside: 'making a new life'; 'to get on with my life and try my best'.

Particular examples of **what young people were looking forward to doing** once they were out of security were 'doing things for myself', seeing the dog again, going on holiday, joining a football team, going to college, 'eating what I want', going out to places, getting a job, doing things as a family, choosing when to turn off the TV, and using a mobile phone again.

Examples of how **young people were worried about returning to their old ways after leaving security** were: 'I'll end up back on drugs'; 'it's not safe. I won't have as much support'; 'offending and getting locked up again'; 'frightened that I will start stealing cars again because I don't want to'. One person told us: 'I will probably commit suicide. Or get into trouble.'

Many people told us they were worried **they would miss the people they were with in security, who had been supporting them so closely**: 'leaving friends behind and all the staff help'. They were also worried that **other people might not want to know them or help them once they had been in security**: 'no foster carer will want me'; 'people knowing about my offence'. One tried to keep the fact that they were in security a secret, but were not sure this would work: 'No one knows where I am except my social worker.' **The main worry for some was that they did not know where they would be moving to after they left the secure unit.**

Last words

The last words in this report sum up some of the experiences we heard from many young people in security.

'Being in a secure unit gives you time to think things through and plan things for when you get back out'

'Once you've been locked up you're not bothered about going back'

'In here it's sort of like a punishment although staff don't see it as but it is'

'Not bothered about education, but wanna learn more things like bricklaying'

'Secure is not what I thought it would be' (from someone who expected to be locked up in a room most of the time)

'If you haven't been out for a long time, when you do leave the unit you feel gob-smacked'

'You're safe and can't get into trouble'

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