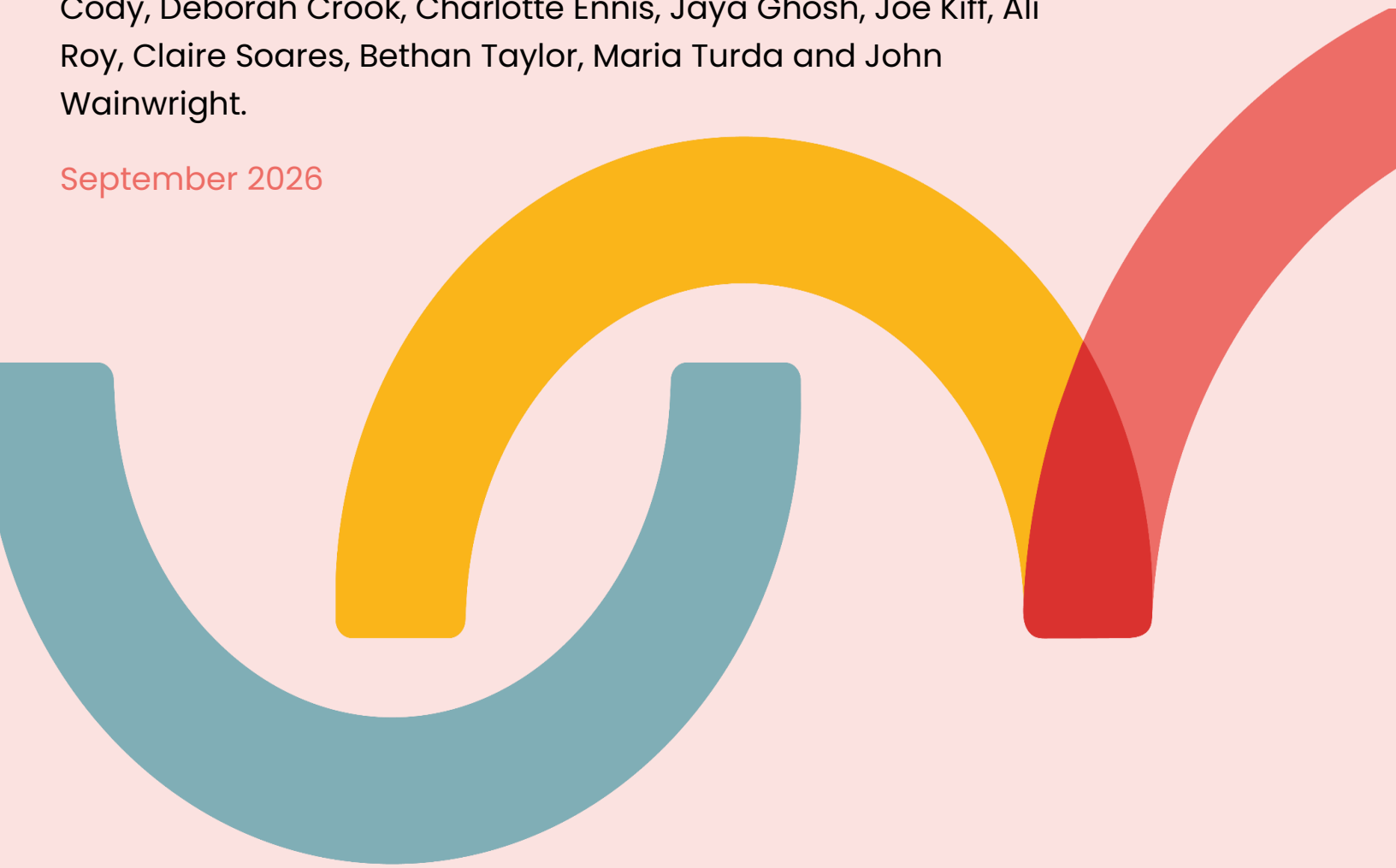


Child-centred policing in practice: Insights from children and young people

Exploratory study report

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¹ Contributor roles have been identified and reported in line with UK Research Integrity Office guidance on good authorship practice.

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Executive summary

About the study

This research explored children and young people's views on how policing could become more child-centred, specifically how police can build trust with and listen to children and young people in encounters with them. The study was commissioned by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) and led by Professor Debra Allnock from the University of Bedfordshire and Professor Helen Beckett and Dr Rebecca Hibbin from the University of Lancashire, with the support of colleagues at these universities. The project ran from September 2025 to February 2026 and addressed the five core questions below.

Research questions (RQs)

RQ1. Context: What is the nature of children's interactions with the police?

- Where do children see, hear and engage with the police?
- Which officers/roles are they engaging with?
- How do reasons for engagement (e.g. being suspected of a crime or experiencing a crime) shape encounters?

RQ2. Trust: How can police build trust with children?

- What positive examples do children give of trust-building and where trust was undermined, what could have improved the interaction?
- How do experiences and needs differ for:
 - children and young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds
 - children and young people who are neurodivergent or have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?
- What specific steps should police take to build trust with these groups?

RQ3. Voice: How can police better listen to children?

- Where do children feel heard (and not heard) in police encounters, and what would improve this?
- Do children want and have opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns to police, and do they feel comfortable doing so?
- How do they want to be engaged, and what do they most want to say?
- How do opportunities and barriers differ for:
 - children and young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds
 - children and young people who are neurodivergent or have SEND?

RQ4. Settings: Do children want different things from the police depending on where they interact?

- What differences do children describe in how they would like to engage with police in different contexts: on the street (including stop and search), at home (e.g. domestic abuse callouts), in and around school, online, in public spaces and in custody?
- How do reasons for engagement (e.g. being suspected of a crime or experiencing a crime) intersect with settings to shape what children say is needed?

RQ5. Practice: What specific changes should be made to operational policing practices to ensure policing is more child-centred, focusing on building children's trust and listening to their voices?

- How can these changes be embedded across officers, teams and forces?

The study combined a scoping review of existing research with focus groups and interviews with 59 children and young people and an online survey involving 64 young people. The participants reflected diverse backgrounds, identities, needs and levels of prior police contact, ensuring that the findings drew on a wide range of lived experiences. The study also conducted consultations with strategic and operational police officers, focusing on translating the findings into practical actions for frontline practice.

The study produced three linked outputs:

- this research report, presenting the evidence base and the eight child-centred policing principles that arose from it
- an operational resource for frontline officers, translating children's insights into practical guidance
- a summary of the study's findings for children and young people.

While child-centred policing applies to all children, longstanding evidence shows that Black children and young people and neurodivergent children and young people – including those with SEND – experience policing differently and more intensively. Centring their perspectives is therefore essential to understanding how trust is built, how voice is enabled and whether policing is genuinely child-centred in practice.

Policy context

The National Police Chiefs' Council's (NPCC's) Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy (2024–27) and the Children and Young Persons Policing Charter (2025) set out a national framework for child-centred policing, placing children's rights, needs and perspectives at the core of police interactions. They emphasise procedural justice, particularly the centrality of trust and voice, as essential to developmentally appropriate and respectful practices. However, national inspections and research continue to identify wide variation in how police engage with children and young people, including inconsistent responses to vulnerability, safeguarding delays, persistent communication gaps, the failure to take action as promised and entrenched inequities that affect Black children and young people and those who are neurodivergent or have SEND.

Key insights

Child-centred policing is achieved through interactional and systemic conditions that consistently support children's safety, understanding, voice and fairness across all contexts and interactions. The following insights synthesise findings across the five RQs and highlight what the participants told us matters most for children and young people's experiences of policing.

Insight 1: Children and young people's core needs remain consistent, but context shapes the conditions required to meet them.

The participants encountered police across a wide range of settings, including public spaces, homes, schools, transport, online environments and custody. Across these contexts, they consistently identified a set of core needs: calmness, fairness, clarity, emotional safety and non-escalatory behaviour. Reflections on the different settings suggest that while these needs are enduring, the ways in which they are experienced and the emphasis placed on them vary by context. For example, public encounters were described as benefiting from slower, non-accusatory approaches; custody from predictability, care and reassurance; home settings from gentle entry and early explanation; and schools from familiar, relational contact rather than crisis-only involvement.

Insight 2: Trust depends on interactional behaviour that signals safety, fairness and legitimacy.

The participants judged police trustworthiness less by the formal purpose of encounters and more by how officers interacted with them in the moment. A calm tone, a clear and age-appropriate explanation, proportionate responses and visible care supported trust, while rushed or accusatory approaches, a lack of explanation, bias and unnecessary escalation undermined it.

Insight 3: Children and young people made clear that feeling heard required more than being given an opportunity to speak.

Children felt heard and felt they could express their needs when officers created predictable, emotionally safe conditions, listened attentively, used developmentally appropriate communication and provided clear explanations about what would happen next or how the children's views had informed decisions. Voice was undermined when children were interrupted, dismissed or spoken over or when nothing changed after concerns were raised.

Insight 4: Identity shapes how police encounters are experienced and their emotional impact.

Children and young people's experiences of policing cannot be understood without attention to identity and intersectional factors. For Black children and young people, routine suspicion, adultification and racialised assumptions shaped how even ordinary encounters were experienced, undermining their trust and sense of being believed or protected. For neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND, harm most often arose from unmet sensory, communication and processing needs, particularly in fast-paced or high-stress encounters. These identity-related patterns shaped not only how encounters

were experienced in the moment but also their longer-term emotional impact on children's sense of trust, voice and safety across different settings. These patterns highlight the need for anti-bias practices and neurodiversity-informed adjustments in child-centred policing.

Insight 5: Police encounters gain meaning through their accumulation over time and across communities.

Children and young people's views of policing were shaped not only by their own direct encounters with officers but also by what they witnessed happening to peers and family members and by police activity encountered online and on social media. These broader narratives, often negative, provided an important backdrop against which individual encounters were interpreted. As a result, routine interactions could either reinforce existing mistrust or interrupt and repair it. Predictable, fair and transparent behaviour was therefore particularly important, as children often drew on single encounters to confirm or challenge broader expectations about policing.

Insight 6: Embedding child-centred policing requires organisational alignment, not just individual effort.

Although children and young people did not typically describe organisational systems explicitly, their accounts of inconsistency, delay and broken follow-through implied wider structural and organisational influences on practices. Police consultations built upon these implications, helping to identify the specific system-level conditions needed to support consistent delivery, including leadership, supervision, training, continuity, adapted environments and follow-up systems. Child-centred policing was viewed as achievable, but only where frontline practice was enabled and reinforced by supportive system-level structures.

Practice implications: Eight child- and young-person-centred policing principles

A set of eight principles was developed from children and young people's accounts to reflect the core expectations they hold across all policing contexts, including clear communication, fairness, emotional safety, proportionate responses and reliable follow-through. These principles provide a coherent child- and young-person-centred framework that is responsive to both identity and context.

Chapters 8 and 9 set out the detailed operational actions that translate these principles into day-to-day policing practices. Developed directly from children and young people's accounts and refined with policing stakeholders, these actions are designed to be realistic, proportionate and usable across roles and settings.

Principle 1: Child- and youth-centred communication

Police should communicate in calm, clear, age-appropriate ways, avoiding jargon, using ordinary language and demonstrating empathy and attentiveness. Tone, pacing and body language are central to helping children feel safe and respected.

Example: Officers take time to introduce themselves, speak in a calm and reassuring tone and use simple, age-appropriate language, checking in to make sure the child feels comfortable asking questions.

Principle 2: Making sense in the moment: clarity, explanation and immediate predictability

Children need simple explanations of what is happening and why, what will happen next, how their information will be used and when they will be updated. Predictability and transparency reduce fear and misunderstanding.

Example: Officers narrate each step of a stop and search or welfare check ("Here is what I'm going to do next, and this is why").

Principle 3: Relational visibility and everyday familiarity

Regular, relational presence in schools, neighbourhoods and community spaces helps children see officers as approachable and human rather than as appearing only in moments of crisis. The continuity of personnel strengthens trust.

Example: The same neighbourhood or school-link officer routinely checks in with children in everyday settings, so encounters are not limited to crises or enforcement.

Principle 4: Fairness, dignity and anti-bias practices

Officers must treat every child as a child, free from assumptions about guilt, race, gender, disability or appearance. This includes actively countering adultification (the tendency for children, particularly Black children, to be perceived and treated as older, less innocent or more responsible than their age warrants) and racialised or stereotype-driven suspicion.

Example: Officers explicitly state the lawful reason for approaching a child ("I stopped because of X"), helping to counter bias and reassure the child.

Principle 5: Supporting voice and participation

Children should have real opportunities to speak, be listened to and influence what happens. Officers' approaches could include offering choices (e.g. officer gender, where to talk), creating safe spaces for discussion and ensuring that listening leads to action.

Example: Officers offer simple choices (“Would you like to talk here or somewhere quieter?”) and explain how the child’s input is shaping their next steps.

Principle 6: Welfare-first and proportionate responses

Officers should begin with welfare, curiosity and de-escalation, using the least intrusive intervention necessary, avoiding unnecessary force and responding seriously to distress or safeguarding cues.

Example: Upon first contact, officers open with a welfare check (“Are you okay? Is anyone hurt?”), helping to set a calm, safety-first tone before asking any investigative questions.

Principle 7: Safe, child-appropriate environments and processes

Environments, especially custody and interview spaces, must feel safe, private and appropriate for children. Police should minimise public exposure, avoid sudden or intimidating actions and ensure that transport and facilities meet children’s needs.

Example: Officers physically position themselves at the child’s level and minimise the number of officers speaking at once, reducing intimidation and sensory overload.

Principle 8: Reliable, accountable and follow-through practices

Trust depends on whether police do what they say they will do. Clear recordkeeping, timely updates, consistent handovers and accessible feedback/complaint routes are essential to demonstrating reliability and accountability.

Example: Officers give a clear time for when they will return with an update, even if there is no progress, and ensure the next officer continues the same explanation.

Concluding observations

Overall, the findings show that children and young people’s experiences of policing are shaped as much by how officers communicate, behave and follow through as by the formal purpose of an encounter. Across all settings, children emphasised the importance of clarity, fairness, emotional safety and predictable processes and expectations, which closely reflect the core components of procedural justice and align with what adults say they want from policing. In this sense, the children were not asking for anything exceptional; rather, they were articulating widely shared expectations of respectful, transparent and trustworthy practices.

At the same time, the study shows that identity, lived experiences of harm and misrecognised and unmet needs shape the extent to which these expectations are realised in practice and can undermine or distort children’s experiences.

Embedding child-centred policing, therefore, requires not only strong relational skills at the point of contact but also system-level alignment, including leadership, training, continuity, accountability and adapted environments, so that every interaction with a child delivers the fairness, respect and legitimacy that procedural justice demands.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This report presents the findings of Youth Endowment Fund (YEF)–commissioned research on children and young people’s perspectives on child-centred policing. The research was led by Professor Debra Allnock from the University of Bedfordshire and Professor Helen Beckett and Dr Rebecca Hibbin from the University of Lancashire, with support from colleagues at these universities and two children and young people’s advisory groups. The research ran from September 2025 to February 2026 and included four key elements:

- a scoping review
- a young person’s survey
- focus groups and interviews with children and young people
- consultations with operational and strategic police officers and staff.

The remit of the study is guided by the principles of procedural justice (respect, voice, neutrality and trustworthy motives), which are widely understood to shape public perceptions of legitimacy and cooperation (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Murphy, 2015). These principles underpin the study’s focus on trust, voice and relational practice and structure the research questions (RQs) explored throughout the report.

1.2 Research questions

The study sought to answer five RQs, outlined in Box 1, as per the YEF’s commission. The first four RQs on context, trust, voice and setting were explored from the perspective of children and young people, elicited through focus groups, interviews and a survey. The first part of RQ5 was addressed through both the implied and explicitly named recommended changes offered by children and young people in this study, with the second part (embedding changes in policing) primarily addressed through police consultations.

Box 1: Research questions

RQ1. Context: What is the nature of children's interactions with the police?

- Where do children see, hear and engage with the police?
- Which officers/roles are they engaging with?
- How do reasons for engagement (e.g. being suspected of a crime or experiencing a crime) shape encounters?

RQ2. Trust: How can police build trust with children?

- What positive examples do children give of trust-building, and where trust was undermined, what could have improved the interaction?
- How do experiences and needs differ for:
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 - children and young people who are neurodivergent or have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?
- What specific steps should police take to build trust with these groups?

RQ3. Voice: How can police better listen to children?

- Where do children feel heard (and not heard) in police encounters, and what would improve this?
- Do children want and have opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns to police, and do they feel comfortable doing so?
- How do they want to be engaged, and what do they most want to say?
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RQ4. Settings: Do children want different things from the police depending on where they interact?

- What differences do children describe in how they would like to engage with police in different contexts: on the street (including stop and search), at home (e.g. domestic abuse callouts), in and around school, online, in public spaces and in custody?
- How do reasons for engagement (e.g. being suspected of a crime or experiencing a crime) intersect with settings to shape what children say is needed?

RQ5. Practice: What specific changes should be made to operational policing practices to ensure policing is more child-centred, focusing on building children's trust and listening to their voices?

- How can these changes be embedded across officers, teams and forces?

1.3 Study remit and definitions

The study had a broad remit, examining a wide range of interactions between children and young people and the police in England and Wales. It incorporates interactions across a wide range of settings and

contexts, including children’s engagement as civic actors,² as victims of harm (or witnesses to harm), as justice-involved children and as children known to have both experienced and caused harm.

In this report, the term “children” follows the legal definition of anyone under 18 years of age. However, because our sample included a wide age range, and because age shapes experiences and expectations of policing, including whether a child is considered criminally responsible, we have used more specific age-related terms where possible to support clarity.

- “Younger children” refers to those aged 13 and under.
- “Young people” refers to those aged 14–17.
- “Young adults” refers to participants aged 18 and over (a small proportion of the sample, up to age 24).

These distinctions are used only where it is possible to differentiate age within the data, noting that some insights were generated through group discussions in which individual ages could not always be attributed to specific comments. Importantly, all participants under 18 are legally children and should be treated as such, regardless of the terminology used to describe developmental differences in the analysis.

1.4 Why children and young people’s participation in research matters

Building on this remit, it is important to consider why children and young people must be active participants in shaping the evidence base on policing. Listening to children is both a rights-based obligation and a route to more effective, legitimate policing. Under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), children have the right to express their views on matters affecting them and to have these views given due consideration, in line with their evolving capacities. These principles are embedded in contemporary youth justice approaches in England and Wales, including the Youth Justice Board’s Child First approach, which positions children as rightsholders and social actors (Case et al., 2024; Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2025).

Children and young people, particularly those disproportionately likely to come into contact with police (e.g. care-experienced, racially minoritised or neurodivergent children and young people and those who have SEND), have crucial insights into how policing feels and operates (Beckett et al., 2015). Participatory and co-produced approaches consistently surface issues that are not visible in administrative data or adult-led reviews, offering practical intelligence to improve decision-making, training and frontline practice (Bovarnick & Cody, 2021; Cody et al., 2024; Wills et al., 2024).

There is also a strong organisational case for investing in participatory and co-produced approaches. Co-produced frameworks align more closely with children and young people’s realities, strengthen

² By civic actors, we mean children and young people who engage with police as members of their communities, such as in forums, neighbourhood spaces or everyday encounters in which they negotiate fairness, legitimacy and collaborative problem-solving. This positioning is distinct from victimhood or offending, as it emphasises agency, participation and civic life rather than harm or criminalisation (Kennelly, 2011).

legitimacy and support more engaging and effective policing. Youth-led structures, such as youth commissions and multi-agency co-design initiatives, demonstrate how children and young people's views can inform priorities, scrutiny mechanisms and operational guidance (Burns, 2019). However, the evidence also identifies risks of tokenism or exclusion, particularly in higher-risk contexts in which protective narratives override participation (Beckett & Warrington, 2024; Burns & Creaney, 2023; Hampson et al., 2024). Without routes from voice to influence, participation can unintentionally reinforce mistrust (Safer Young Lives Research Centre, 2024).

This study has operationalised these principles by building in children and young people's advisory groups from the start, co-designing the main focus groups and engaging two youth researchers from these advisory groups to develop the operational and youth-focused resources that will be developed as outputs from the project.

1.5 Current policy and practice landscape

This project and what it sets out to achieve must be located within the broader governance and operational environment that structures contemporary approaches to child-centred policing. Understanding this landscape is essential for interpreting children and young people's experiences, as formal commitments do not always align with everyday practice.

Policing in England and Wales has undertaken several national commitments to strengthen child-centred practice. The National Police Chiefs' Council's (NPCC's) Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy (2024–27) sets a service-wide direction across three pillars: YourTrust, YourVoice and YourFuture (NPCC, 2024). The Children and Young Person's Policing Charter translates the pillars into nine practical pledges (to be accompanied by a forthcoming force-level self-assessment tool) that emphasise listening, participation, minimal criminalisation and welfare-oriented practices (NPCC, 2025). These principles mirror the broader Child First framework, originating in youth justice (Taylor, 2016; Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2019).

Despite these national commitments, inspections identify substantial variation in how forces interpret and implement child-centred standards. Joint targeted area inspections, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2015) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS, 2019) thematic reviews consistently highlight issues such as delayed safeguarding responses, inconsistent decision-making thresholds, limited understanding of vulnerability among frontline officers and the variable use of tools, including body-worn video, stop-and-search safeguards and arrest/detention alternatives. In addition, HMICFRS (2019) similarly noted that children and young people were frequently not spoken to, with inconsistent recording practices around voice, behaviour and demeanour. Inspections also emphasise the fragility of multi-agency arrangements, particularly around information sharing, joint analysis and follow-up, which directly affects the quality of children's experiences. Recent research reinforces these findings, showing that police personnel themselves report challenges in consistently identifying vulnerability, responding to victim needs and capturing victims' voices during safeguarding and investigative processes (Denyer et al., 2023).

While pockets of strong practice do exist, including co-located safeguarding teams, well-developed multi-agency hubs and forces that prioritise early intervention, these practices are not routinely replicated (Home Office, 2025; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2024; Vulnerability, Knowledge & Practice Programme, 2025; Wood, 2021). Children, therefore, encounter markedly different standards depending on geography, resourcing and local safeguarding cultures.

Operational pressures shape frontline practice.

Frontline officers work with acute resource pressures that shape how encounters with children and young people unfold. Recent national reports highlight chronic underfunding, excessive workloads, and retention pressures, with HMICFRS (2025) finding that officer workloads have risen by more than 30% since 2015 and that forces face crippling demand.

Neighbourhood policing capacity has also declined over the past decade. Although the number of sworn officers has risen, this has been offset by substantial reductions in the numbers of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and police staff, leaving the overall workforce still smaller than it was in 2010 (HMICFRS, 2025; Institute for Government, 2025). This contraction reduces neighbourhood visibility and everyday relationship-based engagement.

High demand across response teams, alongside the rising complexity of caseloads, creates conditions in which decision-making becomes more risk-averse, and frontline interactions risk becoming rushed, enforcement-led and less welfare-focused. HMICFRS (2025) warns that these pressures are leaving forces under financial strain, struggling to meet community needs, and spending increasing amounts of time on complex, resource-intensive vulnerabilities.

Inequities are recognised but insufficiently addressed.

Policy and inspection bodies have documented longstanding racial disproportionality in the use of police powers. HMICFRS's 2021 spotlight report found that all forces were unable to explain why stop-and-search and the use of force are used disproportionately against Black, Asian and other minoritised groups, with implications for public trust and police legitimacy. National strategies such as the Police Race Action Plan (College of Policing and the NPCC, 2022) commit to addressing these inequities for Black communities, yet persistent disparities in stop and search, arrest, the use of force, credibility assessments and access to safeguarding pathways continue to be evidenced (Children's Commissioner for England, 2023; Crest Advisory, 2022; INQUEST, 2023).

Similarly, national guidance references the need to adapt practices for children and young people who are neurodivergent or have SEND, but there is no consistent, mandated framework for sensory-aware environments, communication adaptations or decision-making adjustments. Provision, therefore, varies significantly between forces, custody suites and individual officers (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2021).

1.6 Quantitative evidence on children and young people’s perceptions of policing

Alongside the policy and practice landscape, population-level evidence provides insight into how children and young people perceive and experience policing. Internationally, large-scale studies on children and young people’s perceptions of the police are dominated by adolescent samples, with much less evidence on pre-teens and very limited data on under-10s (Burden et al., 2023; Fine et al., 2019; Nivette et al., 2020; Rodrigues & Medina, 2021; Trinkner et al., 2020).

Across the general population and school-based cohorts, young people’s perceptions of police fairness, legitimacy and interpersonal treatment are typically neutral to moderately positive, mirroring adult findings within the procedural justice framework (respect, voice, neutrality and trustworthy motives) (Murphy, 2015). These elements are also noted to be more influential on young people than on adults, with adolescents showing heightened sensitivity to fairness, tone and neutrality (Murphy, 2015).

Substantial variation exists across groups and experiences, largely driven by the quality of contact. Negative or intrusive encounters, such as repeated stop and searches, harsh language, perceived bias or the use of force, are consistently linked to lower trust, reduced legitimacy and elevated legal cynicism (Foster et al., 2022; Geller & Fagan, 2019; Krieg et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2020; Sindall et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Positive encounters have more modest effects, producing the well-documented asymmetry in which negative experiences weigh more heavily than positive ones (Geller & Fagan, 2019; Murray et al., 2020). Developmentally, perceptions of legitimacy tend to decline from early to late adolescence, with partial recovery (that is, some improvement relative to adolescent lows, but not a return to childhood levels) in early adulthood, especially in justice-involved cohorts (Fine et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2024; Nivette et al., 2020).

England and Wales survey data show similar patterns. The YEF’s Children, Violence and Vulnerability surveys (2024–2025) involving 10,000–11,000 teenagers report that around half (54%) believe police “do a good job”, while fewer (45%) feel that everyone is treated fairly (YEF, 2024a; 2025a). The Crime Survey of England and Wales suggests that the views of children aged 10–15 years are closely aligned with parents’ attitudes and officer visibility (Office for National Statistics, 2025). The Independent Office of Police Conduct (IOPC) Youth Panel surveys also show wide variation in perceived fairness and uncertainty about complaint pathways (IOPC, 2024).

The YEF national survey data also show that a sizeable minority of teenagers report recent violence exposure: 18% as having been victims, 13% as having perpetrated harm and 70% as having seen real-world violence online (YEF, 2025a). Within this dataset, attitudes differ across subgroups. In the police-focused YEF report, teenagers’ assessments of local policing (e.g. whether police “do a good job”, use force appropriately and treat people fairly) vary by age, ethnicity and contact with violence. Notably, young people who have experienced serious violence are more likely than their peers to say local police “do a good job” (62% vs 54%), yet the picture is more mixed on fairness and the use of force, where perceptions diverge by ethnic background and by whether the young person has had direct police contact. These survey findings indicate that victimisation, perpetration and online exposure are associated with shifts in attitudes, but not always in the same direction across dimensions (e.g. “doing a

good job” vs “treating everyone fairly”) or across groups, underscoring the degree of variation in attitudes within the same society, between different groups of young people, that headline averages can hide.

Published data tables from the same 2025 YEF survey suggest that police contact is not universal, but it is routine for a notable minority. Around 1 in 10 had been stopped and searched, a similar proportion had been searched by a school-based officer, 3% had been arrested and 7% had been questioned in the past year. Among those stopped, questioned or arrested, around two-thirds recalled respectful treatment and clear explanations; however, about one-quarter reported not being listened to or not receiving explanations, and around one-fifth reported physical force (YEF, 2025b). Read alongside the wider literature, this pattern is consistent with mixed experiences of contact: many encounters appear procedurally sound, yet a meaningful minority falls short on core fairness and communication cues, precisely the shortfalls linked to sharper declines in adolescent legitimacy in longitudinal studies.

This statistical picture underlines the importance of child-centred approaches and highlights why communication, explanation and follow-through are consistently linked to satisfaction and trust (Jansen et al., 2024; Timukaite & Buil-Gil, 2025; YEF, 2024a; YEF, 2024b).

1.7 What existing qualitative evidence tells us

While the quantitative studies outlined above are also based on children and young people’s views and experiences, qualitative research offers a different kind of insight, providing more detailed, contextualised accounts of how children understand and experience policing encounters.

The scoping review undertaken for this research (see Chapter 2) highlights clear and consistent messages about how children and young people experience policing and what child-centred practice requires. Across 39 qualitative international evidence sources, children’s accounts reveal four overarching findings.

Children’s experiences of policing vary widely by setting, with street and custody encounters driving the most harm.

Children and young people encounter police in many places, including at home, at school, on the street, in custody, in hospitals, at advocacy centres and in community spaces, but their experiences differ starkly (Beckett & Warrington, 2014; Beckett et al., 2015; Palmer, 2016). Street-based policing, especially stop and search, is frequently described as intimidating, unfair and humiliating, with disproportionately negative impacts on Black and minoritised children and young people (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children [APPGC], 2014; Deuchar et al., 2015; Flacks, 2018). While custody is consistently experienced as frightening, isolating and disempowering across age ranges, it is even more so for children (Bevan, 2019; Kemp et al., 2023; Vaswani et al., 2025). By contrast, community forums and advocacy settings offer the most constructive, trust-building interactions (APPGC, 2014; Deuchar et al., 2015; Pala, 2016; The Children’s Society, 2017).

Trust is fragile and built through relational care, clear communication and the recognition of vulnerability.

Trust between children and police is highly fragile and built when officers demonstrate the core elements of procedural justice: respect, voice, neutrality and trustworthiness. Across the evidence, these relational practices are closely tied to trauma-informed approaches, as children frequently describe police encounters, particularly in custody, investigative and enforcement contexts, as distressing or re-traumatising. Trust is strengthened through relational care, clear and age-appropriate explanations, recognition of vulnerability and trauma-informed responses, such as emotional support, choice and continuity, which are often absent but strongly implied in what children say they need (Mazerolle et al., 2013).

Across settings, children and young people consistently describe trust being built when officers:

- communicate clearly and respectfully
- provide continuity by staying involved over time
- show kindness and emotional support
- believe children's accounts
- use culturally and identity-sensitive practices (Beckett & Warrington, 2015; Gearon, 2019; Kempt et al., 2023; Vaswani et al., 2025; Warrington et al., 2016).

Trust is damaged when children experience dismissiveness, coercion, fragmented contact, adultification or profiling or when processes feel opaque or confusing (Butterby & Hackett, 2021; Flacks, 2018). The implication is striking: children do not request complex interventions. What matter most are the small, everyday behaviours that signal care, fairness and reliability – being listened to, checked on and spoken to kindly. These relational moments, rather than formal procedures, are what most powerfully convey police trustworthiness (Li et al., 2024).

Children's voices are often limited to “being allowed to speak”, with very little influence over decisions.

Most children report opportunities to speak, but far fewer feel they are genuinely heard or that their views shape decisions (Beckett & Warrington, 2014; Beckett & Warrington, 2015; Beckett et al., 2015; Warrington et al., 2016). Voice is undermined when children are rushed, dismissed, not given choices or spoken to in jargon (Butterby & Hackett, 2021; Palmer, 2016). Structural inequalities relating to race, gender, neurodivergence and care experience further silence voices through adultification, miscommunication or disbelief (APPGC, 2014; Gearon, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019).

Identity and lived circumstances shape every dimension of children's experiences.

Children and young people's experiences cannot be understood without accounting for identity, lived circumstances and intersectional considerations. Black children and young people consistently face racialised suspicion and adultification, while neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND often encounter barriers because their sensory, communication and processing needs are

misunderstood or unmet. Care-experienced children and young people and those who experience harms related to exploitation and other forms of abuse face additional, compounded barriers to trust and voice (APPGC, 2014; Beckett & Warrington, 2014; Beckett & Warrington, 2015; Beckett et al., 2015; Gearon, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019). Evidence for LGBTQ+ and physically disabled children is notably lacking, signalling important gaps in knowledge (Butterby & Hackett, 2021; Palmer, 2016).

In summary, the evidence strongly signals that child-centred policing must prioritise relational practice, clear communication, continuity, trauma-informed responses and identity-sensitive approaches. These principles are applicable across settings but are especially urgent in enforcement contexts, such as street encounters and custody, where children and young people experience the greatest fear, harm and disempowerment. These insights directly informed the design and delivery of our research.

1.8 Structure of the report

Chapters 2 and 3 set out the study design and introduce the children and young people who took part, establishing the context for interpreting the findings. Chapters 4–6 present the core empirical findings: Chapter 4 examines the nature of children’s interactions with the police across different settings, while Chapters 5 and 6 explore the closely connected themes of trust/trustworthiness and voice, including how they are experienced in police encounters and what children say would support more meaningful practice.

The remaining chapters move from evidence to application. Chapter 7 sets out eight child- and youth-centred policing principles, grounded in children and young people’s accounts and informed by consultations with policing professionals to assess feasibility and implementation challenges. Chapter 8 applies these principles across different policing settings, identifying the practical adjustments that children and young people say make the greatest difference in context. Chapter 9 focuses on the organisational and system-level conditions needed to embed these principles in practice, drawing on consultation insights to highlight enabling and constraining factors. Finally, Chapter 10 synthesises the study’s overall contribution, situating the findings within the wider evidence base and outlining implications for policy and practice.

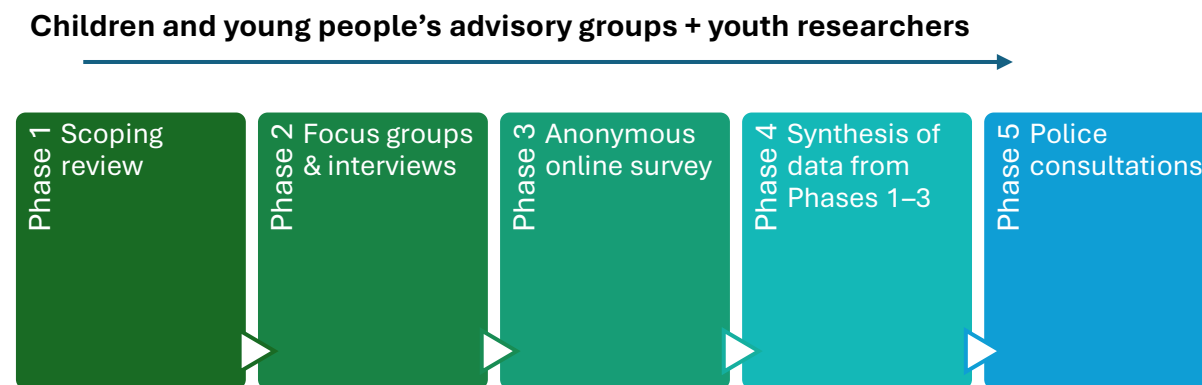
Chapter 2. Methodology

2.1 Overview of the study design

This study examined children and young people’s perspectives on child-centred policing through a multi-phase design informed by participatory principles, including evidence synthesis, primary research with children and young people, and consultations with police officers and staff.

The study comprised five phases (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Phases of the study



Phase 1 involved a scoping review of the existing qualitative evidence on children’s experiences of policing. Phases 2 and 3, which ran concurrently, gathered primary data from children and young people through focus groups, interviews and an anonymous online survey. Phase 4 brought together findings from across these datasets through a structured process of analysis and synthesis. Phase 5 involved consultations with operational and strategic police professionals to explore how children and young people’s insights could be translated into feasible, child-centred policing practices.

Participatory, child-centred and trauma-informed principles guided the design and delivery of the research throughout. Children and young people’s advisory groups, alongside youth researchers, contributed to shaping the data collection approaches, identifying sensitivities and supporting the development of both operational police and youth-facing outputs.

This chapter provides an overview of the study’s methods to support the interpretation of the findings. Full methodological details, including the recruitment procedures, data collection tools, analytic processes and ethical protocols, are provided in Appendices A–E.

2.2 Conceptual framing: trust, trustworthiness and voice

Given the centrality of trust and voice to the study’s RQs, it was important to clarify how these concepts were used analytically. Drawing on procedural justice scholarship, we distinguish between

trustworthiness (how children and young people judge officers' behaviour during encounters) and trust, understood as a willingness to be vulnerable to police authority (Jackson et al., 2012).

In practice, children and young people rarely spoke about trust as an abstract belief in policing as an institution. Instead, their accounts focused on the concrete behaviours and interactional cues through which officers signalled whether such vulnerability felt safe or justified, such as tone of voice, clarity of explanation, calmness, fairness, visible care and follow-through. For this reason, references to trust in children's accounts are treated primarily as judgements about officer trustworthiness, helping to centre the analysis on the specific behaviours that children themselves identified as shaping whether encounters felt safe and fair.

Voice was treated as conceptually distinct from but closely interconnected with trustworthiness. The children and young people's ability to speak, be listened to and influence what happened formed part of how they assessed officer behaviour. At the same time, their willingness to use their voice depended on feeling sufficiently safe during an encounter. In this way, trustworthiness and voice operate reciprocally: opportunities to be heard shape judgements of officer behaviour, while feeling able to speak at all depends on expectations of care, fairness and follow-through.

This framing informed the analysis across the study and underpins the findings presented in the later chapters.

2.3 Participatory design and youth advisory roles

The study was supported by two children and young people's advisory groups: the Young Researchers Advisory Panel (YRAP) at the University of Bedfordshire and The Smarties at the University of Lancashire. These groups played central roles in the design of the children and young people's elements of the project.³ Three YRAP members helped to design and pilot the approach to engaging young people in focus groups and interviews; one YRAP member brought a critical intersectional lens to the project. Four children from The Smarties focused on designing activities tailored to their own group for taking part in a focus group rather than on developing a broader approach intended for use with other children.

³ We had hoped to engage a third Youth Advisory Group through a local, Black-led organisation, which had initially recruited three teenage girls to take part. However, the group could not proceed because neither the girls nor their parents felt comfortable participating in research connected to policing. Although we explained that they would not meet police officers and that their contributions would remain confidential, their prior experiences with the police left them feeling insufficiently safe or confident to participate.

The **YRAP** is a group of 16–25-year-olds who work alongside the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire to ensure research is shaped with young people rather than about them. They bring diverse lived experiences to the design, testing and communication of research, helping challenge the marginalisation of young people’s voices in work on sexual abuse and related harms. Alongside advising on studies, the YRAP also co-develops innovative practice resources, most recently the Participation with Purpose guidance, which applies the Lundy Model of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence to participatory work on child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Smarties is a children’s research advisory group with the Connect Centre at the University of Lancashire, co-created with children aged 8–13 years old in partnership with a local domestic abuse charity. The group aims to promote the need for children’s voices to be central to research about them. The group's work to date has included co-creating a storybook resource for professionals working with children who have experienced domestic abuse (commissioned by the Lancashire Police and Crime Commissioner), co-creating child-friendly outputs for research projects, and co-designing conference presentations on their work.

The contributions of the YRAP and The Smarties were key to developing appropriate engagement methods and advising on the potential sensitivities of engaging children and young people in conversations about the police. We are immensely grateful for their input and for the additional review of the survey provided by some members of the YEF Youth Advisory Board. The insightful inputs all undoubtedly improved the design and conduct of the research.

The YRAP also played an additional role in the project, acting as Youth Advisors on Phase 5, the police consultation phase of the study. This was a more active peer-research role that involved helping design police engagements, sharing research findings during these engagements, and co-facilitating reflective discussions. The YRAP continued to play a key role in designing the operational resource and youth-facing resource. Although support for these roles was provided by members of the research team, the short timeframes of the research necessitated prior research experience, which limited involvement to the YRAP.

2.4 Data collection methods

2.4.1 Phase 1: Scoping review

The study began with a light-touch scoping review to map existing evidence on children and young people’s experiences and perspectives of policing. Conducted alongside a targeted scan of broader quantitative procedural justice-related literature and relevant policy and guidance, the primary review focused on qualitative research that centred on children and young people’s own accounts of policing encounters.

The review covered peer-reviewed and grey literature published between 2015 and September 2025. A total of 39 qualitative studies were included, drawn from both UK and international sources. A structured thematic synthesis was undertaken, with findings first coded against the five core RQs (context, trust,

voice, setting and practice). The second-level analysis within each domain examined recurring themes, divergences and gaps, with interpretations guided by the study's conceptualisation of voice and trust, as described above. This approach enabled comparison across study contexts and participant groups and supported the consistent interpretation of key analytic concepts.

Findings from the scoping review informed the design of all subsequent phases of the study, including the development of RQs, data collection tools and analytic frameworks. The review helped to avoid duplication, identify gaps in the existing evidence base and contextualise the children and young people's accounts within wider patterns identified in the literature. Insights from the review are therefore woven throughout the analysis presented in the later chapters.

Full details of the scoping review methodology, including the search strategies, screening procedures, data extraction and analytic methods, are provided in Appendix A.

2.4.2 Phase 2: Focus groups and interviews

Focus groups and interviews formed the core qualitative strand of the study, providing in-depth, contextualised accounts of children and young people's experiences of policing. This phase was designed to create safe, inclusive and developmentally appropriate spaces in which the participants could share their perspectives, with flexibility built in to reflect diverse needs, preferences and circumstances. The approach was co-designed with the children and young people's advisory groups, considering issues of accessibility, relevance and emotional safety.

In total, 56 children and young people aged 11–20 took part in this phase of the research: 49 participated in the focus groups and 7 in individual interviews. Focus groups were offered as the primary method to support peer interaction and collective reflection, with one-to-one interviews provided where this format was safer or more appropriate. Sessions took place in person and online (through Teams, Zoom or Discord), reflecting the participants' geographical spread and existing modes of engagement.

The participants were recruited through the facilitating agencies already supporting them. These organisations shared information about the study, supported informed decision-making, provided on-the-day assistance where appropriate and provided follow-up support for the participants. This recruitment approach helped ensure that participation was offered ethically and safely, particularly given the sensitivity of discussing policing experiences, and enabled the inclusion of children and young people with varied backgrounds, identities, needs and levels of prior police contact.

Invitations for the focus groups and interviews were shared through a wide range of facilitating agencies that work directly with children and young people and are well placed to offer support around potentially sensitive topics. These included:

- youth support services, such as community youth projects, Targeted Youth Support teams and youth work organisations, some with remits to support neurodivergent children and young people and those who have SEND
- voluntary-sector organisations supporting young people experiencing adversity, including those specialising in exploitation, violence, trauma or mental health
- youth justice services supporting justice-involved young people
- national organisations with a broader geographical reach, working with young people across England.

The focus groups and interviews were underpinned by a flexible, trauma-informed toolkit designed around the study's RQs, alongside an "about you" form, in which the participants could optionally provide demographic details (e.g. gender, age and ethnicity). The toolkit offered multiple ways for the participants to engage, including open discussions, structured prompts, scenarios and creative response options, allowing the facilitators to adapt sessions to group dynamics and individual needs. The participants were encouraged to participate as they felt comfortable, including which questions they wished to answer and how long they wished to participate.

Full details of the design of this phase can be found in Appendix C.

2.4.3 Phase 3: Survey of children and young people

The survey was designed as a qualitative, reach-extending method rather than as a tool for generating representative or statistically generalisable findings. It was used in two ways: (1) to broaden the range of children and young people contributing to the study and (2) to offer those who had taken part in the focus groups a private space for sharing experiences or reflections that they may not have wished to, or felt able to, discuss in a group setting. While the survey included some closed questions, its design prioritised text responses and narrative accounts. The survey was open to young people aged 13–21, with the upper age limit extended to 25 for participants with SEND to reflect policy frameworks recognising continuing support needs into early adulthood.⁴

To ensure that the appropriate support was available if participation raised concerns, the survey was disseminated exclusively through facilitating agencies that work directly with children and young people. Thirty agencies with existing relationships with the research team agreed to share the survey, alongside a further seven services recruited through targeted outreach to relevant providers. The participating organisations included youth support services, voluntary sector organisations and national bodies

⁴ The survey age range was extended to 25 for participants with SEND to align with national policy frameworks that recognise children and young people with SEND as entitled to support up to age 25. This follows the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education/Department of Health and Social Care, 2015), which sets out statutory guidance for education, health and care services and establishes that young people with SEND may continue to require adapted communication, participation support and safeguarding-related adjustments beyond age 18.

working with young people with diverse backgrounds, needs and levels of prior contact with the police. The agencies were asked to share information about the study without pressure, enabling young people to decide for themselves whether to take part.

In total, 84 young people opened the survey, of whom 64 provided substantive free-text content for analysis. The closed-ended questions were analysed descriptively for frequency, and the free-text responses were analysed thematically to explore patterns in the young people's accounts of trust, voice and police practice and to support comparisons with findings from the focus groups and interviews.

Consistent with its intended purpose, the survey findings are therefore used to provide indicative insights that extend and complement the qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews rather than to represent the views or experiences of all children and young people.

Full details of the survey design, including the survey instrument, are provided in Appendix B.

2.4.4 Phase 4: Data analysis and synthesis

The analysis was conducted across three qualitative data sources: the scoping review, focus groups and interviews with children and young people and free-text responses from the young people's survey. Given the applied and time-limited nature of the study, the analytic approach prioritised conceptual coherence, transparency and cross-dataset synthesis rather than exhaustive, iterative coding.

Across all qualitative datasets, the analysis was organised using the study's five RQs as an overarching analytic framework. This provided a consistent structure for examining children and young people's experiences of policing across context, trust, voice, setting and practice while allowing space for inductive insights to emerge from the participants' own accounts. Attention was paid to the analytic distinction between trustworthiness and voice, which served as a lens for interpreting the children's descriptions of officer behaviour and their own capacity to speak and be heard.

Qualitative data from the focus groups, interviews and survey free-text responses were thematically analysed by two researchers, with initial coding undertaken at a high level against the RQs. A subset of the material was cross-checked to ensure the consistency of interpretations, and emerging themes were discussed within the research team to support reflexivity and coherence. Although full double-coding was not feasible within the project timescales, analytic decisions were documented and sense-checked through regular team discussions.

The synthesis involved bringing together findings from the scoping review, qualitative fieldwork and survey closed- and free-text responses to identify areas of convergence, reinforcement and divergence. Themes that appeared consistently across multiple data sources were treated as particularly robust, while differences were explored in relation to context, setting or group-specific experiences rather than smoothed out. The quantitative survey findings were subsequently integrated to provide descriptive context and to situate qualitative insights within broader patterns.

Interpretation was informed by the research team's prior expertise in qualitative research with children and young people; policing and safeguarding contexts; race and ethnicity; and neurodivergence and SEND. The researchers' fieldwork notes were used to reflect on how the setting, facilitation and group dynamics may have shaped the participants' accounts, supporting reflexive engagement with the data throughout the analysis.

2.4.5 Phase 5: Police consultations

The police consultations served as a translational stage of the project rather than as part of the primary research data collection. While the research centred on children and young people's accounts, this phase sought to explore how insights derived from those accounts could be applied, operationalised and embedded within policing practices.

Consultations were designed to engage policing professionals in reflecting on the study's emerging child-centred principles and considering their feasibility across different roles and policing contexts. A total of 20 participants from 10 police forces across England and Wales took part in the 2 operational and strategic groups that we ran.

These discussions focused on identifying practical actions, organisational levers and implementation challenges to inform the development of the accompanying operational resource. While insights from the consultations helped shape practice guidance, they are not research findings.

Full details of the consultation structures, materials, data handling and participant review processes are provided in Appendix D.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Universities of Bedfordshire and Lancashire. Ethical conduct was prioritised throughout, reflecting the sensitivity of researching children and young people's experiences of policing and the potential for discussions to involve distressing or discriminatory encounters.

The research was underpinned by a trauma-informed and child-centred approach, paying close attention to the principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment (Beckett et al., 2025). Participatory principles were embedded where possible, including through the involvement of children and young people's advisory groups, flexible delivery methods and the use of existing trusted relationships with facilitating agencies to support safe participation.

A proportionate, developmentally appropriate approach to informed consent was applied across all phases. Informational materials were adapted for age and accessibility, including for neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND. Participation was voluntary, and the participants could choose whether and how to take part, skip questions, pause or withdraw from the research.

Safeguarding considerations were central to the study design. The focus groups and interviews were conducted through facilitating agencies with established safeguarding procedures, and clear protocols were in place for responding to concerns about participant safety. While no safeguarding disclosures arose during fieldwork, the arrangements ensured that concerns could be escalated appropriately if needed. Given the anonymous nature of the survey, individual safeguarding follow-up was not possible. This was made clear to the participants, who were signposted to the relevant support services.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout. Data from the interviews, focus groups and consultations were anonymised, and identifying details were removed during transcription and analysis. Limits to confidentiality, including around safeguarding (as above) and group-based settings, were communicated clearly in both written and verbal formats.

Full details of the consent procedures, safeguarding protocols, data protection arrangements and participant reciprocity are provided in Appendix E.

2.6 Notes on interpretation and limitations

This study was designed to provide in-depth insight into children and young people's experiences of policing rather than to generate representative or generalisable findings. As a predominantly qualitative, participatory study, it offers a close examination of how policing is experienced across different contexts, identities and forms of contact and should be read as illuminating patterns and processes rather than as describing prevalence or scale.

Data from the focus groups, interviews and survey are complementary rather than equivalent in depth or purpose, and findings are clearly attributed throughout the report to support transparent interpretation. Quantitative survey results are used descriptively and contextually, not inferentially, and are intended to situate qualitative insights rather than to replicate large-scale population surveys.

The participants' experiences of policing varied across encounters and settings. Individual accounts sometimes reflect both positive and negative experiences, which should be understood as capturing the variability and complexity of real-world policing encounters rather than as analytic inconsistency. The patterns identified in the findings are therefore grounded in thematic convergence across accounts rather than in uniformity of experience.

While the study deliberately engaged a diverse group of participants, including Black children and young people, as well as those who are neurodivergent or have SEND, the sample size and structure limit subgroup analysis. The findings highlight important differences in how policing is experienced across identities and circumstances but do not support definitive claims about all children or all policing contexts. These limits are acknowledged throughout and inform the way the findings and implications are framed.

Chapter 3. An overview of the children and young people who took part

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the children and young people who contributed through the young person's survey, interviews and focus groups. Together, these datasets offer diverse perspectives from children and young people with varied backgrounds, identities, needs and experiences of policing and safety.

3.2 Survey respondents

The survey analysis is based on data from 64 young people. Full details of the survey and response patterns can be found in Appendix B. Of these, three young people participated in focus groups but chose to complete the survey as well, while the remainder were new participants who only took part in the survey.

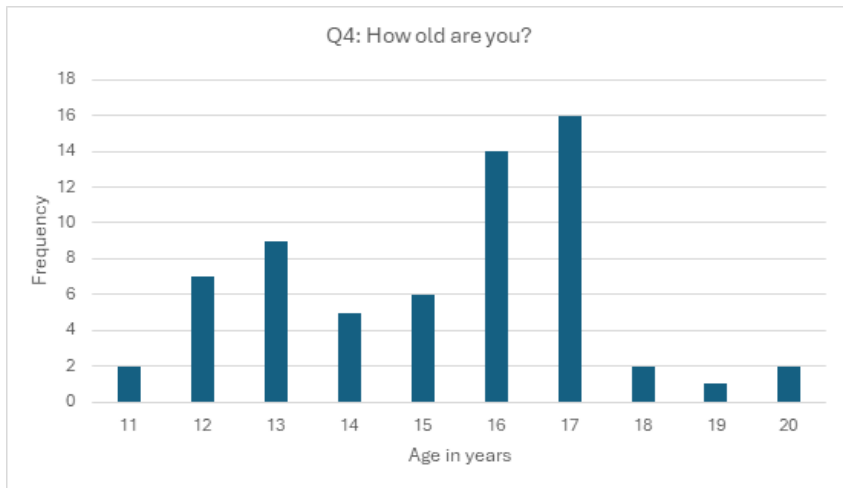
Two baseline figures were used in the analysis:

- n=64 for sample characteristics and the final reflective questions on general perceptions of policing
- n=71 for the experience-based analysis (in other words, the 64 respondents retained for the analysis told us more about 71 experiences).

Characteristics

The 64 respondents in the analysis ranged in age from 11 to 20, as shown in Figure 3.1; 52 participants (81%) were 17 years old or younger, while 12 participants (19%) were 18 years old or older. The largest groups were aged 16 (22%) and 17 (25%).

Figure 3.1: Age of survey respondents (n=64)



Most of the respondents were male (n=48, 75%), with 12 (19%) girls, 1 transgender boy and 3 whose gender was not stated; this may be due to recruitment routes that reached more boys and fewer girls. It is also possible that boys and young men have had more police contact than girls, and so they perceived the survey as being more relevant to them.

Most of the 64 respondents identified as straight/heterosexual (n=52, 82%), with the remainder identifying as bisexual (n=4), gay (n=2) and queer (n=1) and 5 preferring not to say.

The ethnic breakdown is shown in Table 3.1. The majority of the respondents were White British.

Table 3.1: Ethnicity of survey respondents (n=64)

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage
White British	49	76.6%
White Other	2	3.1%
Black African	2	3.1%
Asian (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi)	1	3.1%
Mixed Heritage	6	9.4%
Other ⁵	3	3.1%
I prefer not to say	1	1.6%

⁵ The three respondents who chose other noted they were British Pakistani, White Irish and Traveller. We have left them as “other” rather than recoded in reflection of their choice.

Twelve respondents (18%) identified as having a disability or long-term condition, with most of them reporting a learning disability (n=10), a mental health condition (n=6), a physical disability (n=1) and long COVID (n=1). Five reported multiple co-existing disabilities.

More than a third of the 64 respondents reported being neurodivergent, with under an additional fifth reporting uncertainty. Of the 12 who provided details, 9 said they had attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD⁶), 5 said they were autistic, and 1 reported “other” but did not provide details. Several young people reported more than one form of neurodivergence.

Most of the young people who responded to the survey stated they had no experience of being in care, although nearly a fifth (n=10; 16%) reported being care-experienced.

Contact with the police

The participants were presented with a predefined list of nine types of contact with the police and were asked to indicate which they had experienced, with an additional “other” option to capture experiences not covered by the list. When the participants reported multiple types of contact, they were invited to select which experiences they wished to discuss further. As such, while 197 total contacts were reported across the sample, the experience-based survey findings draw on the 71 instances that the participants chose to reflect on in more detail.

Table 3.2: Respondents’ experiences with police and experiences answered in the survey

Type of experience	Respondents reported having experience with		Experiences respondents chose to answer further questions on	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
See the police in the neighbourhood ⁷	38	60%	13	18%
Family or friends involved with the police	29	45%	7	10%
The police gave a talk about school	28	44%	12	17%
Saw or knew about a crime taking place	20	31%	6	8%
Experienced a crime	19	30%	4	6%
Someone was worried about my safety	18	29%	7	10%
Questioned about committing a crime	17	27%	7	10%
Arrested	11	17%	6	9%
Been stopped and searched	11	17%	3	4%

⁶ ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition associated with differences in attention regulation, activity levels, and impulse control. Experiences and support needs vary considerably between individuals.

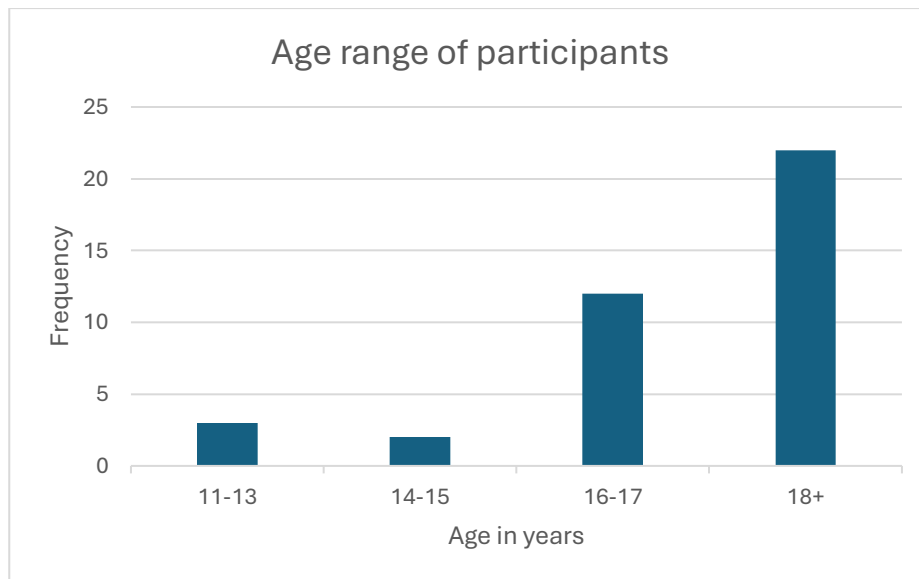
⁷ Some other participants selected “other”, but there is not enough information to analyse responses against.

3.3 Focus group and interview participants

A total of 56 children and young people took part in focus groups and interviews. Thirty-nine completed an optional “about you” form.

Figure 3.2 details the age range of the children and young people who completed an “about you” form: 17 (43%) were 17 years old or younger, and 22 (56%) were 18 years old or older.

Figure 3.2: Age range of focus group and interview participants



Although over half of those who provided information about their age were 18 or older at the time of participation, all were recruited because the research focused on experiences of policing under the age of 18. While we did not seek detailed accounts of specific experiences in group settings, given the reduced anonymity and potential risks to the participants’ emotional safety, discussions were framed around the participants’ childhood experiences. In the individual interviews, in which privacy and participant control could be more effectively maintained, it was safer to explore specific experiences in greater depth.

Any references to encounters after age 18 (where this was evident) were treated as contextual and not analysed as childhood experiences.

Of the 39 participants who provided information, more were female (n=24, 62%) than male (n=11, 28%); 2 reported being transgender boys, 1 was non-binary and 1 preferred not to say. As with the survey, the gender profile reflects the study’s recruitment through support services and youth spaces as well as the voluntary, discussion-based nature of participation.

Of the 34 participants who provided this information, just under half (n=18, 53%) identified as straight, with 6 identifying as bisexual, 4 as lesbian, 3 as gay and 2 as pansexual. One preferred not to say.

Of those who provided information (n=39), over three-quarters reported being White British (n=30, 77%). The remaining respondents reported the following ethnicities: Asian (n=4), Black African (n=2), Mixed Heritage (n=1) and preferred not to say (n=1).

Of the 35 participants who answered this question, just over half (n=20, 57%) reported having a disability. This included a physical disability (n=3), a mental health disability (n=3) and a learning disability (n=3), and nine young people said they had co-existing disabilities. Two young people did not specify a disability.

Of the 33 participants who answered this question, nearly three-quarters (n=24, 72%) reported being neurodivergent. The details provided by 22 young people indicated that most reported being autistic (n=12) or having ADHD (n=8). Others reported having dyslexia (n=3), borderline personality disorder (n=2), an audio processing delay (n=1), premenstrual dysphoric disorder (n=1) and multiple co-existing neurodivergent conditions (n=8), and three were unsure.

Of the 35 participants who answered the question, 7 (20%) reported being care-experienced.

Experiences of police contact varied across the participants (see Table 3.3), with the most common types being that they had experienced a crime/harm, they had seen police give a talk at their school, they had someone worried about their safety, they had family and/or friends involved with the police and they had seen or knew about a crime taking place.

Table 3.3: Types of contact with police (focus group and interview participants)

Type of experience	Number	Percentage
Experienced a crime or other harm	16	42%
The police gave a talk about school	10	26%
Saw or knew about a crime taking place	9	23%
Family or friends involved with the police	9	23%
Someone was worried about my safety	9	23%
See the police in the neighbourhood	7	18%
Arrested	4	11%
Questioned about committing a crime	3	8%
Been stopped and searched	3	8%

3.4 Use of unique identifiers in quotations

To protect anonymity while preserving context, quotations are attributed using unique identifiers that indicate the data source and broad participant grouping (see Table 3.4). Focus group participants are

identified using the codes shown in Table 3.4, while survey respondents are referred to using respondent numbers (R1-R64), with each number representing a unique survey participant. We take care to:

- attribute identity characteristics only when participants self-identify them
- avoid assumptions in mixed-focus groups
- use group-level identifiers when individual-level demographics are not known.

This approach ensures identity-linked insights are highlighted where relevant while safeguarding anonymity in small or marginalised groups.

Table 3.4: Unique identifiers for focus group and interview quotations

Category	Identifier	Description
Neurodivergent/SEND focus groups	FG ND1	Neurodivergent/SEND Group
	FG ND2	Neurodivergent/SEND Group
Black young women focus group	FG BW1	Black young women group
Mixed-identity focus groups	FG MX1	Mixed young people
	FG MX2	Mixed young people
	FG MX3	Mixed young people
	FG MX4	Mixed young people
	FG MX5	Mixed young people
	FG MX6	Mixed young people
Black young people interviews (male)	IV BJM1	Black justice-involved male interview 1
	IV BJM2	Black justice-involved male interview 2
	IV BJM3	Black justice-involved male interview 3
White young people interviews (male)	IV WJM1	White justice-involved male interview 1
	IV WJM2	White justice-involved male interview 2
	IV WJM3	White justice-involved male interview 3
	IV WJM4	White justice-involved male interview 4

Note: SEND = special educational needs and disabilities

3.5 Concluding observations and insights

The survey and the focus group/interview samples provide a rich and complementary picture of how children and young people experience policing. Neither dataset represents all children and young people in England and Wales, nor is this the intention. Instead, each method served a different analytic purpose within the study design. The survey functioned as a reach-extending tool, enabling a broader range of young people to contribute reflections on policing encounters, including those who may not have wished to participate in group settings. The focus groups and interviews enabled a more in-depth, contextualised exploration of experiences, meanings and interpretations.

Both samples were shaped by purposive recruitment through supporting agencies, the voluntary nature of participation and a focus on broader experiences of policing rather than solely on formal involvement in the criminal justice system (CJS). As with many qualitative studies on sensitive topics, participation

reflected the availability of trusted recruitment routes and young people's own decisions about whether and how to take part. While children and young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds are included across the survey and qualitative samples, their numbers are small, reflecting the study's reliance on voluntary participation rather than on any targeted recruitment by ethnicity.

There are, however, important limitations to bear in mind when interpreting the findings, particularly for groups over-represented in the CJS more broadly. First, boys and young men are under-represented in the focus groups and interviews relative to their over-representation in police-initiated contact and enforcement-led encounters, such as stop and search, arrests and custody. Second, while Black children and young people are included in the study, no participants identified as Black Caribbean, limiting the extent to which the findings can speak to the specific historical and contemporary patterns of policing experienced by this group. Third, relatively small numbers of participants in the qualitative sample described or chose to share direct experiences of high-intensity or confrontational police encounters, including arrests, custody and repeated enforcement contact, which existing research shows are particularly consequential for trust, voice and perceptions of legitimacy.

These limitations mean that the findings should be read as offering strong insight into how child-centred policing is experienced and evaluated rather than as a comprehensive account of all policing encounters or of all the groups most affected by criminal justice involvement. Importantly, the patterns identified in this study align closely with a substantial existing qualitative and quantitative evidence base on policing, trust and procedural justice, particularly in relation to enforcement-led encounters, racialised disproportionality and justice-involved youth populations. Where experiences such as custody, arrest and stop and search were less prominent in this dataset, they are well documented elsewhere and are drawn on throughout the report to contextualise and interpret the findings.

Conversely, neurodivergent children and young people and those with disabilities or SEND are well represented in the sample, in part due to recruitment through support services and the use of flexible, accessible research methods. This is substantively important given the study's focus on voice, communication and trust and reflects an area where existing research and policy guidance remain comparatively underdeveloped. Overall, the samples offer robust insight into how policing is encountered and understood across a wide spectrum of childhood and adolescent experiences while also pointing clearly to where further research is needed to deepen understanding for the groups most exposed to enforcement-led policing.

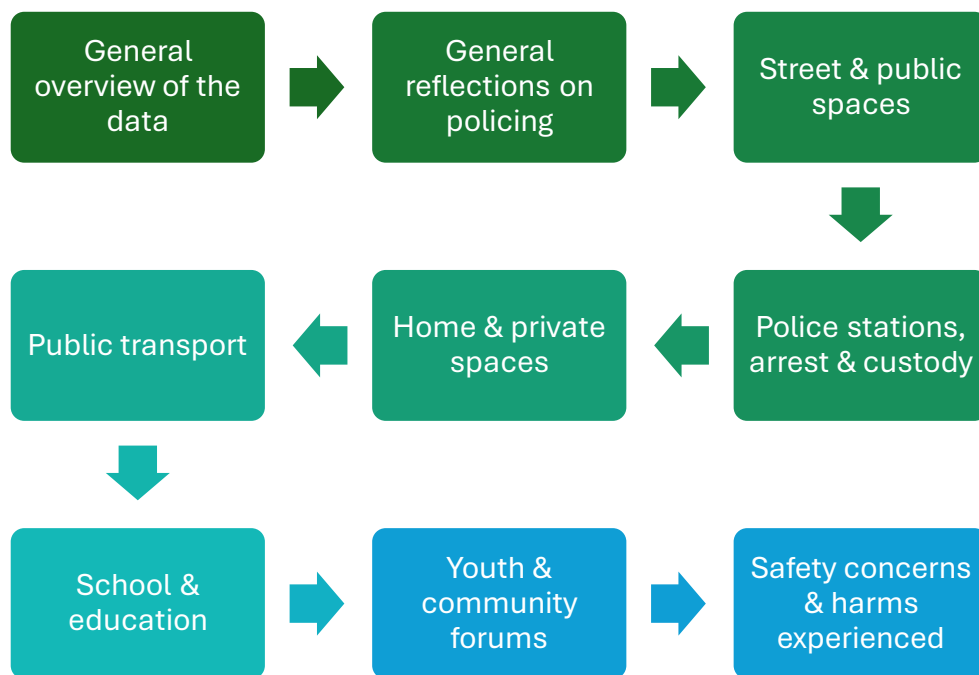
Chapter 4. The nature of children’s interactions with the police

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses **RQ1** by examining **the nature and contexts of children and young people’s encounters with the police**. It explores where and how children encounter policing in their everyday lives, the settings in which these interactions occur and how young people describe and make sense of these experiences. In doing so, the chapter considers the range of police roles and contexts children encounter, including formal and informal contact, planned and unplanned interactions and encounters in public, institutional and private spaces.

To support the reader, Figure 4.1 provides a visual overview of the chapter’s structure.

Figure 4.1: A roadmap of the chapter



The context sections are organised according to how frequently each appeared across the focus groups, interviews and survey responses and according to the depth and richness of the insight provided, even where a setting was discussed less often.

4.2 Overview of the data

Both the qualitative and survey datasets included context-specific reflections as well as broader commentary about the police as a general entity. In some cases, children and young people did not anchor their reflections to a specific incident or place, instead drawing on accumulated experiences, indirect exposure and wider community narratives, a pattern well documented in research on young people’s perceptions of policing (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Development Services Group, Inc., 2018).

Across both datasets, neighbourhood and public-space encounters were the most frequently discussed, identified by 60% of the survey respondents and mentioned in all but one focus group and interview. Other key settings included:

- custody and police stations, often described through suspect experiences
- home or private spaces
- transport environments
- schools, particularly police-led talks or assemblies.

Less frequently, young people referenced youth/community forums and the court. Online interactions were primarily discussed indirectly, informing how children and young people’s perceptions of the police are formed.

The survey respondents could select multiple types of contact. Across 64 respondents, this yielded 197 reported encounters; however, the respondents provided more detail for only 71 of them. Of these, and beyond the 60% who reported seeing police in their communities, Chapter 3 details the other ways the survey respondents reported having contact with the police, with “contact via family and friends” and “police giving a talk at school” being the next most common selections.

The respondents rated their chosen experiences from 1 (“really bad”) to 10 (“really good”). Across the 71 encounters detailed, the average ratings varied substantially by experience type, as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Average ratings of police, by experience type (survey respondents)

Police experience	Average rating
The police gave a talk at my school.	6.6
I saw or knew about a crime taking place.	6.5
Someone was worried about my safety.	6.4
I see police in my neighbourhood.	5.9
I was questioned about committing a crime.	5.8
My family or friends have been involved with the police.	5.4
I have been stopped and searched.	5.3
I have experienced a crime.	4.5
I have been arrested.	3.7

Across settings, the children and young people encountered a range of police roles, including neighbourhood officers, response officers, custody staff, transport police and PCSOs. However, the participants rarely distinguished between these roles in their accounts, referring instead to encounters simply as interactions with “the police”.

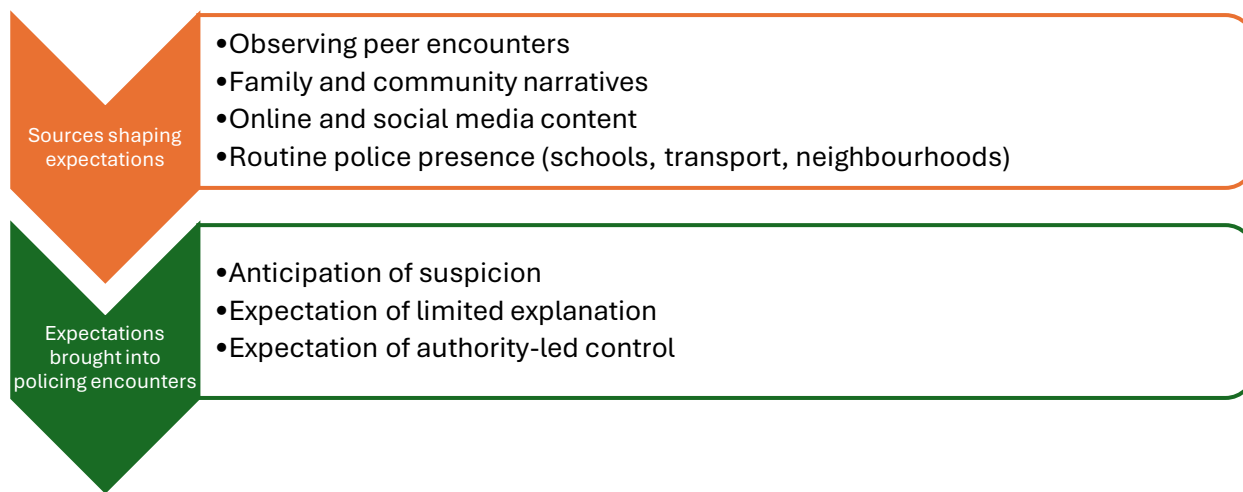
4.3 Children and young people’s generalised reflections about the police

Across almost all of the focus groups and interviews and in the final section of the survey, the children and young people offered broad reflections on policing as an institution, capturing shared expectations rather than specific encounters. These comments described the wider interpretive context through

which interactions with the police were anticipated and understood. As one participant reflected, *“I feel like the average young person sees the police as an authority rather than a protector and might be scared to say the wrong thing and get arrested”* (FG MX4). Rather than being drawn from single experiences, these orientations served as starting points for understanding policing more generally.

Figure 4.2 illustrates how these expectations were described as forming through everyday sources and carried into subsequent police encounters.

Figure 4.2: How general expectations were formed for children and young people in this study



Indirect and mediated sources of understanding policing. The participants described forming their views of the police through a range of indirect, routine and mediated sources, often prior to any direct interaction. These sources included observing police encounters involving peers, such as witnessing a friend being stopped and questioned on public transport (*“I’ve witnessed this just yesterday”* [FG MX4]), as well as family and community narratives that framed policing as a familiar and longstanding presence (*“It’s kind of how it’s always been talked about in my area”* [FG BW1]). Online and broadcast media were also frequently cited, with the participants describing exposure to policing-related content via platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, news feeds and television. This content was often characterised as being repetitive and decontextualised, particularly short clips showing arrests, confrontations or moments of high emotion: *“You always see videos of police being bad... never what they actually go through”* (FG MX3); *“Every single thing I see on the news is them doing something wrong”* (FG MX3).

A small number of participants also commented on police use of social media platforms aimed at younger audiences. These accounts expressed discomfort or uncertainty where officers or police accounts adopted informal tones or popular trends and where it was unclear which accounts were official or how information shared online might be monitored or used: *“I wouldn’t take a police officer seriously if 10 minutes ago I saw them using silly TikTok videos”* (IV WJM4).

Routine visibility and anticipatory self-monitoring. Routine police visibility in everyday spaces further reinforced these impressions. Some young people described heightened self-monitoring when officers were present, anticipating scrutiny or intervention even in the absence of direct engagement: *“If I see a*

police officer walking down the street, I already feel like I need to be careful” (FG MX4). These moments were often understood in relation to the wider narratives encountered through online media or community discussions, linking physical presence with prior expectations about policing behaviour.

From cumulative exposure to expectations of encounters. Indirect and mediated experiences contributed to a shared set of expectations about how police encounters were likely to unfold. Rather than being anchored to single incidents, the expectations reflected cumulative exposure over time, across settings and across platforms. The participants most commonly anticipated encounters shaped by suspicion, limited explanation and a strong emphasis on authority, with interactions expected to prioritise control over dialogue. As one participant put it, police should *“talk them through all the steps that will happen so there are no surprises”* (FG ND2).

These expectations shaped how the children and young people anticipated their own positions within encounters, whether they would be included, questioned, watched or directed and how far they might be able to seek clarification. The expectations were not uniform. Black and Mixed Heritage participants more often anticipated profiling or harsher treatment, frequently discussed in relation to adultification. Neurodivergent participants similarly anticipated being misunderstood or overwhelmed, particularly when officers were perceived as having limited awareness of sensory or communication needs.

The survey findings echoed these patterns. When asked whether police treat some groups of children and young people differently, 55% of respondents (n=30) said yes, 16% (n=9) said no and the remainder were unsure. Free-text responses most often identified Black and racially minoritised children as being treated differently by police. Smaller numbers also mentioned boys, children from particular areas, disabled children, care-experienced children and those with prior police contact. Several respondents emphasised the importance of age-appropriate approaches, including recognising older adolescents as children, avoiding stereotyping and improving treatment in settings such as custody.

These accounts describe a shared backdrop of expectation and anticipation that children and young people carried into later encounters with the police. This context helps explain how police actions were interpreted across different settings and provides grounding for the direct encounters examined later in this chapter.

Summary insights 4.1: Global reflections on policing



1. Children and young people form expectations about policing through cumulative exposure.
2. These expectations are brought into police encounters as assumptions about how interactions are likely to unfold.
3. The expectations are not uniform and vary by identity and lived experience.

4.4 Street and public spaces

Street and public-space encounters were the most frequently described forms of police contact across the qualitative interviews, focus groups and survey reflections on experiences with police. Children and young people referred to a wide range of everyday environments in which these encounters occurred, including streets near home, walking routes, parks and green spaces, town centres and high streets, seafronts, transport hubs and areas associated with the night-time economy.

The nature and timing of encounters. The qualitative interview participants commonly described public-space encounters as brief and unplanned. The encounters often occurred during ordinary activities, such as walking, meeting friends, waiting for transport or spending time in communal outdoor areas. Several young people described police arriving suddenly, sometimes by vehicle, before any conversation had taken place. One interview participant recalled officers “*jump[ing] out*” of a car before initiating contact, highlighting the abruptness of the encounter (IV BJM3). Others described being approached, watched or monitored while “*doing nothing*”, illustrating the low threshold for police visibility in these spaces.

The survey responses reinforced the picture of public-space policing being frequent but often fleeting. Many respondents described seeing police walking or driving through neighbourhoods, around schools or along local streets without any direct interaction. These encounters were typically recorded in minimal detail (for example, “*driving around the block*”, “*walking around sometimes*” or “*seen from a window*”), suggesting that public-space policing was experienced as a recurrent but often unremarkable feature of everyday life unless something unexpected occurred.

Scale, distribution and uneven presence. Both qualitative and survey data highlighted variations in the scale and distribution of police presence across different public settings. In the focus groups, the participants highlighted periods or locations where police presence appeared limited relative to the number of people present. One young person described a local event for rural young farmers held in an urban area where this imbalance was particularly noticeable: “*On farmers’ weekend, there’s literally no police... sometimes five police with thousands of farmers*” (FG ND2).

By contrast, in urban neighbourhood streets or parks, participants described police presence as more concentrated, often focused on small groups of young people. In some accounts, this presence involved little or no direct engagement, with police remaining nearby, observing or moving through the area.

Survey narratives aligned with this pattern, showing that young people noticed frequent patrols in certain areas and prolonged absences in others. Several respondents referred to police being repeatedly visible outside specific houses or in areas with a local reputation for antisocial behaviour, reinforcing the sense that public-space policing was not evenly experienced across places.

Parks as distinctive public settings. Parks emerged as informal and accessible gathering places, particularly for younger teenagers, and also as settings where different age groups and activities intersected. The participants described visible drug use or dealing, antisocial behaviour and the

presence of young people or adults engaging in activities perceived as risky, including alcohol use, vandalism and the climbing of unsafe structures. One young person noted of younger teenagers, “*Sadly, you can see they can seriously hurt themselves*” (FG ND2). The survey responses echoed these accounts, often situating police contact within wider group or bystander contexts. Across both datasets, parks were described as spaces where police encounters were more likely to occur in the presence of groups and spectators rather than in isolation.

Modes of policing in public space. Public-space encounters were shaped not only by location but also by mode of policing. In the focus groups and interviews, young people referred to a mix of neighbourhood patrols, response officers arriving in vans and, in a small number of accounts, armed response teams. These descriptions were generally factual, with young people noting differences in uniforms, vehicles and equipment rather than discussing officer roles or intentions. One participant recalled seeing officers with firearms moving rapidly through a public area, describing it as “*quite a scene*” in an environment where children were present (FG MX1). The survey responses similarly referred to visible police activity, such as patrol cars with lights, officers using torches or police chasing individuals in public; the respondents often referred to these experiences without a detailed explanation of what prompted the incident.

Visibility and co-presence. Across both the qualitative and survey datasets, public-space encounters were frequently described as occurring in the presence of others. Young people spoke about interactions taking place in front of friends, peers, passers-by, teachers or local residents, with little opportunity to withdraw from the setting or reduce exposure. This co-presence was particularly evident in streets, parks, school gates and transport-adjacent areas.

This high visibility made public-space encounters especially memorable, even when brief. While many survey respondents recorded minimal detail about routine visibility, encounters that involved sudden movement, multiple officers, vehicles or enforcement activity were more likely to be recalled and described.

Summary insights 4.2: Street and public spaces



1. Street and public spaces are the most common sites of police contact and visibility in children and young people’s everyday lives.
2. Public-space encounters are typically brief, unpredictable and highly visible.
3. Police presence in public space is experienced as uneven across places and times.

4.5 Police stations, arrests and custody

Police stations were the second most frequently discussed setting in the qualitative data, primarily in relation to arrests and custody. Although mentioned less often than streets or public spaces, custody-related encounters generated more sustained and detailed accounts. The survey findings mirrored this pattern, with responses about arrests, questioning and detention typically longer and more detailed than those relating to schools, neighbourhood visibility or community forums, indicating that custody experiences were particularly salient and memorable for children and young people.

Uncertainty, waiting and lack of information. Across accounts, custody was characterised by prolonged waiting and limited or inconsistent information. The participants described being told that interviews or the arrival of an appropriate adult would happen soon or at a specific time, only to wait for hours without explanation; one young person recalled waiting more than three hours beyond the promised interview time, alone in a cell with no updates. Others reported receiving contradictory information from different officers about detention length, next steps or welfare checks. Administrative gaps, such as paperwork not being passed between shifts or officers failing to return, contributed to extended periods without contact or reassurance. The survey responses echoed this temporal uncertainty, with young people often describing custody in terms of long durations and extended waiting relative to the brief actions that eventually occurred.

Basic care and physical conditions. The participants placed a strong emphasis on basic material conditions in custody. Across the qualitative accounts, young people described limited access to food, water, toilet paper, blankets and fresh air, as well as broken or unreliable call buzzers that made it difficult to ask for help. Some described remaining in handcuffs for extended periods despite reporting pain. One participant described being held for several hours for a very brief interview:

“Held... for around six hours for a five-minute interview; no food and poor updates” (IV WJM1).

Others described the lack of child-appropriate stimulation:

“All they give you is literally a book of all the laws... exactly what you want to be reading when you don’t know what’s happening” (IV WJM3).

The survey respondents made similar observations. One 17-year-old reflected on food, bedding and comfort in custody:

“I’d change the Pot Noodles you get in custody to sandwiches... The mattresses and pillows in custody need to be changed... A book to read or something in the cell... Being able to sleep would be good” (R1, 17-year-old male).

Several qualitative interview participants reported welfare failures, including missed checks or delayed provision of basic items:

“I actually passed out in the cell... they didn’t check on me... they didn’t give me a blanket until I begged for it” (IV WJM2).

Uncertainty about the physical environment also contributed to distress. Some young people described not being told what in-cell closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras could or could not see, particularly those positioned near toilets:

“There’s a camera right next to the toilet... I didn’t know if they could see the toilet or not... they didn’t explain what it was for” (FG MX5).

Inconsistent responses within and across custody experiences. The accounts of custody described uneven and inconsistent treatment. Some participants experienced dismissive or minimising responses, while others described moments of care or support, often depending on staff roles or the individuals involved.

One participant described being told to *“stop whinging”* after reporting pain from tight handcuffs and felt disbelieved when they showed the marks on their wrists (FG MX5). By contrast, other accounts described more supportive responses, including an officer recognising claustrophobia and allowing time out of the cell: *“He let me go out... get some fresh air... it helped a little bit”* (FG ND1), and a nurse who checked on this same young person’s wellbeing: *“She asked if I had problems with mental health... she was the only one who checked”*.

The survey responses reflected a similarly mixed picture. Some young people recalled calm or supportive treatment: *“Police dealt with me nicely... they didn’t chuck me into the back of a van”* (R1, 17-year-old male); *“[The officer] told me what was happening... They didn’t shout or be mean”* (R4, 12-year-old male). Others highlighted marked differences across incidents or over time, including increasingly harsh treatment: *“Each time has been different... Rougher with me as [I] got older... don’t listen or explain, use long words”* (R6, 18-year-old male).

Access to supportive adults. Several accounts described limited or delayed access to supportive adults during custody. One particularly detailed qualitative account came from an 11-year-old whose *“nan”* had accompanied him at the point of arrest but was not allowed to stay with him at the station. He recalled being explicitly told that *“she’s not allowed to be with me”* (IV WJM2) and being placed in a cell despite asking repeated questions about why this was necessary. He reported being told only that there was *“a possibility you could [escape]”*. The same young person described his mother, his primary carer, not being informed of his arrest until the following day, even though she *“would have been there straight away”* had she known. He was released late at night, after being detained alone for several hours.

The survey and qualitative accounts also referred to the emotional toll of custody and questioning:

“If you’re being kept in a police room and asked so many questions, it can feel really draining...”
(FG MX2).

“I just felt so scared when I was being questioned...” (R3, 13-year-old female).

Neurodivergent experiences in custody. The neurodivergent participants described custody as being particularly overwhelming. Their accounts referred to sensory overload, panic in confined spaces and distress linked to rapid procedural movement, fast-paced speech and limited explanation. The participants reported difficulty coping without access to familiar regulation strategies or aids, with these conditions sometimes leading to heightened distress or shutdown. The survey responses echoed concerns about how custody environments and police actions could affect children with additional needs. As one respondent noted, *“Just because the kid has done something bad... They could be autistic! If you arrest them and have to touch them, this could trigger them... Police actions could trigger children’s traumas”* (R2, 15-year-old male).

Transport to and from custody. Transport was frequently described as being part of the custody experience rather than as a separate stage. The qualitative participants reported sliding around in the back of vans, remaining handcuffed despite experiencing pain and being ignored when asking questions during transport. One participant described being taken to the wrong station due to capacity issues and being told to either wait *“two or three hours”* for onward transport or walk a two-hour return journey (FG MX5). Some also referred to body-worn video being turned off during transport (IV WJM3). These transport experiences were narrated as continuous with detention, sharing the same features of uncertainty, physical discomfort and lack of explanation.

Summary insights 4.3: Custody and arrest



1. Custody experiences are highly salient, prolonged and vividly recalled, despite occurring less frequently than public-space encounters.
2. Custody environments are characterised by waiting, uncertainty and basic material deprivation.
3. Experiences within custody were variable and inconsistent, often differing between staff, moments and repeated encounters.

4.6 Home and private spaces

Home and other private spaces featured less frequently than street or custody settings in participants’ accounts but were described as being particularly intrusive and emotionally charged when police

attendance occurred. Across the focus groups, interviews and survey responses, police contact in the home was most often linked to domestic abuse incidents, safeguarding concerns, welfare checks and arrests. These accounts reflect wider evidence that policing in private spaces can be especially disruptive for children and young people, sharply exposing the boundary between personal safety and formal authority (Allnock et al., 2021; Beckett et al., 2015; Butterby & Hackett, 2021; Elliffe & Holt, 2019; Warrington et al., 2016).

Intrusion and blurred boundaries. Across the qualitative and survey data, police entry into the home was commonly experienced as overwhelming or invasive. Young people described officers, sometimes multiple, entering suddenly or forcefully or with high-visibility equipment, transforming the home into a police-controlled space rather than a place of safety:

“When they came for my brother... they knew he weren’t there... they started on me... I wasn’t happy... I felt invaded” (IV WJM3).

“They just barged in... I was in my boxers... they’ve searched my whole house too, and that felt really intrusive... I felt belittled” (R1, 17-year-old male).

In some cases, this sense of intrusion was intensified by a discrepancy between what young people had been told to expect and what actually occurred, such as officers arriving in multiple vans with high-visibility equipment despite assurances that the visit would be discreet (IV WJM1).

Officer conduct inside the home. Once inside the home, officers’ behaviour was commonly described as task-focused and procedural. Children reported being questioned rapidly, being spoken to as though implicated in others’ actions or not being acknowledged at all, with officers prioritising adult concerns and investigative tasks over the needs of the children present. *“They did their job... but there wasn’t a lot of empathy... just ticked this box, this box”* (FG ND1).

Officers were often perceived as rushed or disengaged (FG ND1), meaning home-based encounters were experienced as functional rather than relational, with little recognition of the emotional impact of the intrusion on the children in the household.

Family context and crisis. Young people often situated home-based police encounters within wider family crises, most commonly involving parental mental health difficulties, domestic abuse, stalking or ongoing conflict: *“Nine times out of ten, it’s not the child who needs support – it’s the parent”* (FG ND2). Across accounts, police contact was shaped by delays, inconsistent attendance or a narrow focus on adult behaviour, with children remaining physically present in the home during extended periods of unresolved risk. In these contexts, young people described waiting inside the household while threats, conflict or parental distress continued, contributing to uncertainty about their immediate safety and what would happen next.

Delayed attendance. Several qualitative accounts – of police responses to domestic abuse, stalking or other threats impacting the home environment – described significant delays between incidents being reported and officers attending, even when young people felt unsafe or unable to leave the house: *“It*

took 'em three days though... absolutely ridiculous” and “They don’t take domestic violence serious” (FG ND1). One participant described a perpetrator coming to the door “with a knife... and [trying] to break down the door”, with police attendance not occurring until a week later (FG ND1). Others reported remaining inside the home for extended periods while waiting for officers to arrive. The survey responses presented a more mixed picture: alongside reports of delay or dissatisfaction, some young people described officers’ actions on attendance as calm and supportive, including ensuring immediate safety in the home or transporting injured family members to hospital: “They were really nice and made sure we were okay” (R8, 15-year-old female).

Neurodivergence and sensory overwhelm. For neurodivergent children and young people, police attendance at home was often described as overwhelming. The participants recounted officers entering abruptly, asking multiple questions or raising their voices, sometimes triggering acute distress: “They barged in... berating him with questions... he had a full-on meltdown” (FG ND2). Factors such as the speed of entry, the number of officers present, the tone of questioning and the lack of explanation were described as intensifying sensory overload. The survey responses similarly highlighted how physical handling, sudden movements or raised voices during home visits could be distressing for neurodivergent children.

Movement out of the home. Some police encounters involved children being moved out of the home as part of safeguarding or welfare responses, including transport in police vehicles. These transitions were described as disorienting and, in some cases, overwhelming, particularly for neurodivergent children. One participant recalled an autistic young person being taken home in the back of a police van, describing the experience as physically and sensorily distressing despite the officers being perceived as kind. Being relocated in this way was experienced as a further disruption following police attendance in a private space.

Summary insights 4.4: Home



1. Police presence in the home was experienced as uniquely intrusive and disruptive to children and young people.
2. Home-based encounters were closely bound to family crisis and heightened emotional intensity.
3. Children and young people were often seen or perceived to be peripheral to home encounters, despite being directly affected by them.

4.7 Public transport

Public transport settings were discussed in a small number of focus groups and interviews and appeared occasionally in survey responses. References included encounters on trains, at train stations

and in transport hubs involving British Transport Police (BTP), Transport for London (TfL) staff and local police. Although limited in volume, these accounts highlighted transport environments as distinct public spaces characterised by crowding, movement and visible authority.

Unclear roles and authority. Some young people, in both the focus groups and survey responses, described uncertainty about the roles and powers of different uniformed personnel in transport settings. Young people reported difficulty distinguishing between BTP officers, transport staff and local police, which left unclear who had the authority to stop, question or demand compliance. As one participant observed: *“I find transport police [and] train staff may take advantage of young people regarding ticket evasion... profiling and stereotypes of youths”* (FG MX4). Others emphasised that unfamiliarity itself contributed to uncertainty: *“I’ve genuinely never seen the [BTP] before, so I don’t know”* (FG MX4).

Fare enforcement, identity checks and escalation. The participants most often described police encounters in transport settings in relation to fare enforcement, identity checks or stop and search. These encounters were characterised by rapid escalation, public visibility and limited explanation, with authority exercised through demands for compliance. One young person recalled witnessing an encounter in which refusal to give details was met with an immediate threat of arrest: *“The BTP officer told the person they would be arrested if they refused to give details... The TfL staff didn’t do anything”* (FG MX4).

The survey accounts reflected similar dynamics in more formal stop-and-search encounters within transport hubs. One respondent described a station-based stop involving multiple officers, where restraint was used despite minimal resistance:

“There were three officers... They put my friend in cuffs... He was quiet... He didn’t do anything... They explained why they were there... They didn’t need to cuff my friend; they treated him differently” (R7, 17-year-old male).

Visibility, confinement and heightened intensity. Transport environments were described as physically enclosed and highly visible, limiting young people’s ability to move away from police activity. Some participants recalled witnessing intensive policing on trains, including armed officers moving rapidly through carriages. The group of younger children expressed how this could raise anxiety for them: *“Officers... with their guns... came running down our aisle”*, which felt *“quite a scene... alarming for children”* (FG MX1).

Neurodivergent experiences in transport spaces. A small number of participants highlighted that busy, noisy and unpredictable transport environments could be especially overwhelming for neurodivergent young people. One described freezing during encounters with transport staff: *“I feel uneasy and anxious around TfL... I would freeze and just obey whatever they say in order not to get into trouble”* (FG MX4).

Summary insights 4.5: Public transport



1. Public transport settings emerged as infrequently discussed but distinctive sites of police contact.
2. Transport encounters were shaped by uncertainty about authority and rapid, procedural enforcement.
3. High visibility and enclosure intensified how transport encounters were experienced.

4.8 Schools and education settings

Police contact within schools was discussed in four focus groups and a small number of survey responses. Compared with street, custody or home settings, school-based encounters were less prominent and typically episodic. Police involvement was most often recalled in relation to assemblies or talks; specific incidents such as fights or assaults; or safeguarding concerns.

Forms of police presence in schools. Across the focus groups, the participants described police appearing infrequently in school settings, usually for one-off events. Several recalled attending a single assembly or talk during their school years: *“I probably had one talk with the police... and that was it”* (FG ND1). The survey responses reflected a similar pattern. Most reflections involved police or PCSOs giving talks on safety or crime, lasting anywhere from 15 minutes to 1 hour. A small number of survey respondents recalled a more regular police presence, such as officers walking around the school, although these descriptions were brief and factual.

School incidents and thresholds for police involvement.⁸ A prominent theme in the qualitative data concerned young people’s experiences of harm within school contexts, including bullying, violence, sexual harm and abusive relationships. The participants frequently described incidents they regarded as serious but that led to limited police action, particularly when those causing the harm were under 18. Several young people described being injured during school-related incidents that were addressed through warnings rather than investigation. The participants contrasted the handling of these incidents with how they believed similar situations would have been treated if those involved were adults: *“My wrist is severely damaged still... but he got off with a warning...If we were adults, he would’ve been arrested... but because he was a kid, it was just a warning”* (FG ND1). The findings suggest a need for clearer and more transparent thresholds for police involvement in school-based incidents involving serious violence or harm, particularly where young people experience injury or ongoing risk. While

⁸ National guidance emphasises that most behavioural and disciplinary issues in schools, including bullying, should ordinarily be managed by education providers rather than the police. Police involvement is intended to be proportionate and limited to incidents that meet criminal or safeguarding thresholds, such as serious violence, sexual offences, hate crimes or persistent harassment (NPCC, 2020).

national guidance appropriately discourages routine police involvement in bullying, young people's accounts indicate that some school-based incidents are perceived as exceeding this remit, creating uncertainty about how harm is recognised and responded to when those involved are under 18.

Gatekeeping and escalation. In the focus groups and interviews, young people described schools as playing a significant role if and when incidents were escalated to police. They described escalation to the police as contingent on school decisions, with some perceiving that schools restricted police involvement rather than facilitating it: *"Schools are stopping police getting involved by not passing things on"* (FG ND1). This positioned police responses as secondary to educational judgements about severity, contributing to uncertainty about how and when serious harm in school settings would be addressed.

Summary insights 4.6: Schools and education settings



1. Police contact in schools was infrequent and episodic compared with other settings.
2. School-based police encounters were closely shaped by how incidents were managed and escalated by schools.
3. School settings were described as sites where serious harm could be perceived as minimised when children causing harm were involved.

4.9 Youth and community forums

Youth and community forums, while only discussed in two focus groups, provide rare, detailed examples of informal, relational engagement between children and young people and police outside enforcement contexts. The participants described community forums as environments where officers felt less intimidating and more approachable, in contrast to public settings where uniforms, equipment and demeanour can feel overwhelming. One group (FG ND1) explained that officers can look *"very intimidating... always a serious look... all the heavy gear on"*, but in community settings, you *"can have a good talk with them"*, underscoring how setting and tone shape perceptions.

4.10 Safety concerns and harms experienced

Although not tied to a single setting and only briefly referenced in the qualitative material, the survey data captured a small but distinct group of experiences relating to safety concerns and harm. They included seven accounts involving missing episodes and eight accounts of experiencing harm or victimisation, spanning sexual assault, emotional abuse, physical assault and assault by an officer.

Missing episodes and safety concerns. Accounts of how police engaged with respondents during missing episodes and safety-related concerns were generally brief, reflecting the episodic and time-limited nature of contact in these situations. Across the survey data, police involvement in missing

episodes most often took the form of welfare checks, telephone contact or attempts to establish a young person's whereabouts through friends or family members.

Several respondents described police maintaining contact over a period of days while a young person was missing, particularly where the concern related to a friend rather than themselves. In these cases, police contact typically involved checking whether the missing person had been seen and providing updates as the situation developed:

"[They stayed in touch] over a period of days until she was found... I know that I can go to them if any of my other friends or family go missing" (R22, 14-year-old female).

Other accounts similarly described police attending or making contact to confirm that a young person was safe, sometimes following parental concern about a late return home or loss of contact. These interactions were generally described as calm and welfare-oriented at the point of contact.

However, the respondents' accounts also highlight wide variations in the outcomes following missing episodes. Some participants described situations in which police were unable to locate a missing young person or where contact was limited, delayed or did not result in further action. In these cases, the absence of resolution or progress was a prominent feature of how the experience was described:

"If I was the parent in this situation... I'd feel a bit failed by the system... because my child had been missing and police did not find him" (R1, 17-year-old male).

A small number of respondents also described confusion following missing episodes, including one account of an arrest during a return home, and wished that police had provided more support to help prevent repeat missing episodes.

Experiences of harm and victimisation. The survey respondents who described engaging with police in relation to experiences of harm and victimisation outlined a range of responses across different stages of contact. The accounts frequently distinguished between initial police attendance and the longer-term progression of cases. While some respondents described prompt attendance, calm engagement or the arrest of suspects, these early actions were often followed by delays, limited follow-up or the lack of case progression.

This pattern appeared across different forms of harm, including physical assault, sexual assault, emotional abuse and police-perpetrated harm. Several respondents described difficulties accessing police at the point of reporting, including extended waits to make contact following violent incidents:

"It took two and a half hours to actually get through on the phone... then when they came to my house all they did was take a statement and not actually do anything about it" (R19, 17-year-old male).

In other cases, the respondents described mixed experiences in which police took action in the immediate aftermath of harm, such as attending the scene or making arrests, but where subsequent

engagement was limited. One respondent, reflecting on repeated assaults, described police arresting those responsible and ensuring immediate safety, alongside an absence of victim support and timely resolution:

“They kept me safe, and they did arrest the two boys... but there was no victim support... The whole experience takes too long as well – over seven months so far” (R5, 15-year-old male).

The accounts involving sexual or emotional abuse similarly focused on case outcomes, with the respondents describing investigations being closed due to insufficient evidence, even when they reported having provided detailed information or supporting material:

“They said my evidence wasn’t strong enough... and closed the case” (R10, 20-year-old male).

Across these experiences, the respondents tended to describe police actions in concrete terms, such as taking statements, making arrests or explaining decisions, alongside extended timeframes for decisions, actions or outcomes and limited visibility into what happened once a report was made. The survey data, therefore, highlight considerable variation in how experiences of harm were handled, particularly between the initial responses and what followed.

4.11 Concluding observations and insights

Children and young people’s accounts described a wide spectrum of encounters with police, ranging from fleeting visibility and informal contact to high-intensity enforcement, including stop and search, arrests and custody. These interactions occurred across a range of environments, most commonly in streets and public spaces but also in homes, schools, transport settings and police stations, with arrests and custody-based encounters generating particularly detailed and emotive accounts despite being less frequent. Children and young people referred to contact with a range of policing roles, including neighbourhood officers, PCSOs, response officers, transport police and custody staff, but typically did not clearly distinguish between the roles, describing experiences more generally as interactions with “the police”.

Cross-cutting chapter insights

1. **Children and young people's experiences of the police are shaped by the same recurring features across different settings**, such as how visible and public encounters are, how much control police have over what happens and how long it takes, how officers speak to them and how well things are explained.
2. **Children and young people can struggle to distinguish between police roles, powers and responsibilities**, contributing to uncertainty during encounters across streets, transport, schools, custody and online contexts.
3. **Inequality, adultification and unrecognised neurodivergent needs act as cross-cutting intensifiers of harm**, shaping how police actions are experienced and interpreted, regardless of setting. This is discussed in more depth in Chapters 5 and 6.
4. **Children and young people understand police encounters in the context of everything they have seen and experienced before**, including their own contact with police, what they have seen happen to others, what family and community members say and what they see online or in the media, rather than as one-off events.

Chapter 5. *“Be more personable... just be normal people, especially to children”*: Trustworthiness: How children and young people judge whether police can be trusted

5.1 Introduction

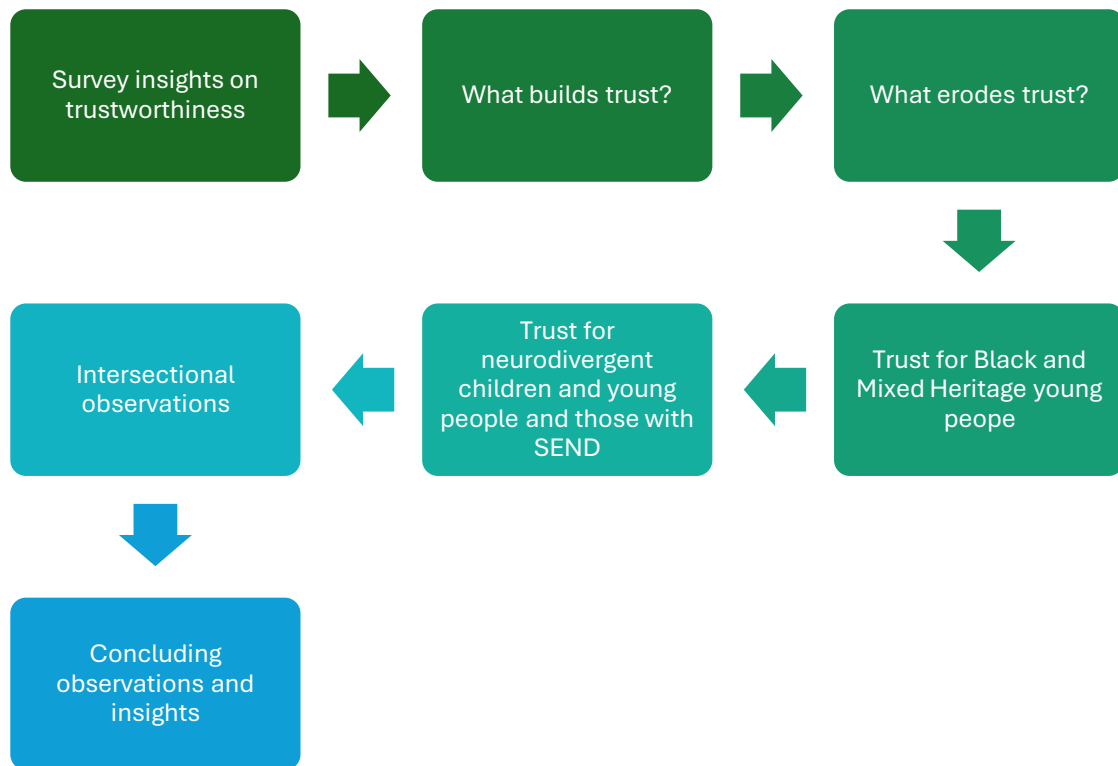
This chapter addresses **RQ2: How can police build trust with children?** Drawing on children and young people's accounts, it examines how trust is built or undermined during police encounters, focusing on the policing behaviours, practices and situational factors that shape perceptions of officer trustworthiness. The chapter also considers how experiences of trust differ for specific groups, including Black and other racially minoritised children and young people and those who are neurodivergent or have SEND and why these differences matter.

As outlined in Section 2.2, children and young people sometimes spoke about trust in broad terms, referring to the institution of policing. However, most detailed accounts centred on officer behaviours during encounters: tone, pacing, clarity, fairness, empathy and respect. We therefore interpret these accounts primarily as judgements of trustworthiness – behavioural cues that signal whether an officer is safe, fair and well-intentioned.

Trustworthiness (how children and young people judge officers' behaviour during encounters) provides the behavioural foundation for trust to develop. It is closely connected to, but distinct from, *voice*. A child or young person may feel trust yet still feel unheard or may feel able to share their views but not actually trust the officer. Chapter 6, therefore, focuses specifically on voice; here, we examine how children and young people experience interactions with police and how they decide whether police officers feel trustworthy. Their accounts show that trust is shaped less by attitudes toward policing in

general and more by what officers *do in the moment* – how calm, fair, clear and child-aware individual officers are. Figure 5.1 helps the reader navigate the chapter.

Figure 5.1: A roadmap of the chapter



5.2 Survey insights on trustworthiness

To examine how survey respondents experienced police trustworthiness, the survey included a series of items aligned with the core dimensions of procedurally fair and respectful practices (see Appendix B). These questions were answered with reference to the specific police experiences the respondents chose to describe in more detail. The respondents rated police behaviour on a three-point scale (“did a good job”, “were alright” or “didn’t do this well”), with an additional “don’t know/don’t want to say” option. The items covered interpersonal conduct (e.g. respect, calmness, fairness, non-discrimination), communication and decision-making (e.g. explanation, involvement, choices) and perceived safety and support.

Overall patterns across all experiences.⁹ Across the 71 experiences described, perceptions of police trustworthiness were mixed, with no single dimension receiving consistently high or consistently low ratings. Most items showed a similar distribution: moderate evaluations (“were alright”) were common,

⁹ Caution: (1) Some demographic categories (e.g. ethnic groups other than White British) have very small numbers, requiring caution in interpretation. (2) Experience types are unevenly distributed (e.g. more school interactions than arrests). (3) Some respondents contributed multiple experiences, though each experience reflects a distinct police encounter. (4) “Don’t know/don’t want to say” responses were high in involvement-related questions, making it difficult to distinguish between lack of memory, lack of meaningful involvement and reluctance to evaluate.

strong positive endorsement (“did a good job”) was less frequent and a substantial minority selected “don’t know/don’t want to say”.

Interpersonal dimensions were rated most positively overall. Non-discrimination, keeping young people safe, treating them with respect and remaining calm each received “did a good job” ratings from approximately one-third to one-half of respondents, with a further 20–30% indicating that police “were alright”. Negative ratings on these items were generally lower, and uncertainty was less pronounced.

By contrast, the items relating to involvement and follow-up, such as offering choices, involving young people in decisions, checking whether they needed help and understanding their perspectives, attracted lower levels of strong endorsement. Across these domains, only around one-fifth of respondents selected “did a good job”. However, these items did not attract substantially higher negative ratings; instead, responses were more dispersed across “were alright”, “didn’t do this well” and “don’t know/don’t want to say”, indicating greater variability and uncertainty in how these aspects were experienced.

Variation by type of experience. Experience type was the strongest source of variation in trust and procedural justice ratings.

Police talks in schools and seeing police in neighbourhood settings tended to attract more positive interpersonal ratings, particularly for calmness, respect, explanation and safety. In these contexts, around 35–55% of respondents reported that police “did a good job” on core interpersonal dimensions, with lower endorsement for involvement-related items. Encounters where young people were bystanders to crimes showed a similar pattern, though numbers were small and responses more variable.

Adversarial or high-stakes encounters, including being stopped and searched, being arrested, being questioned, having family or friends involved with police or being in situations involving safety or welfare concerns, were associated with lower levels of positive endorsement across multiple dimensions. In these contexts, many items attracted fewer than 20% “did a good job” responses, alongside higher proportions of negative and uncertain ratings, particularly for fairness, explanation, involvement and choices.

Across these higher-intensity or more adversarial encounters, young people were less likely to report feeling involved in decisions, being offered choices or being clearly informed about what was happening and were more variable and often less positive in their assessments of trust, fairness and calmness. Taken together, these findings suggest that encounters involving enforcement, suspicion or welfare intervention place greater demands on police practice and are more likely to expose weaknesses in how procedural fairness is experienced by young people.

Variation by demographic group.

Age: Young people aged 14–15¹⁰ reported the highest levels of positive endorsement across several core dimensions of police behaviour. In this age group:

- 50% reported that police “did a good job” in terms of calmness and keeping them safe
- 40% rated police positively on fairness and involvement in decisions
- 60% reported that police “did a good job” in relation to non-discrimination.

Negative ratings in this age group were generally low (0–20%), and no respondents aged 14–15 selected “didn’t do this well” for fairness, involvement or choices. While involvement and choices were not universally endorsed, this age group showed the strongest overall trust profile across interpersonal and procedural measures.

Young people aged 18 and over¹¹ recorded the lowest trust and procedural justice ratings across nearly all variables. Across key dimensions:

- only 16.7% rated police as having “done a good job” on calmness, fairness, non-discrimination, keeping them safe or involvement
- 0% reported that police “did a good job” in offering choices
- negative ratings were relatively high, with 50% reporting that police “didn’t do this well” on non-discrimination and 33% doing so for calmness and safety.

This age group’s experiences were disproportionately concentrated in adversarial encounters, such as arrests and stop and searches, which likely contribute to the consistently lower ratings observed. Findings for this group should therefore be treated as indicative rather than generalisable due to the small numbers and experience type.

Children aged 13 and under¹² reported moderate to positive trust on interpersonal dimensions but very low perceived involvement.

- 37.5% rated police as having “done a good job” in terms of calmness.
- 33.3% did so for fairness.
- 45.8% did so for non-discrimination.
- 41.7% did so for keeping them safe, with very low negative ratings on safety (4.2%).

By contrast, involvement-related ratings were markedly lower.

- Only 4.2% reported that police “did a good job” in involving them in decisions.
- 20.8% did so for offering choices.
- A substantial proportion selected “were alright” or “didn’t do this well” for these items.

¹⁰ These findings are based on 10 experiences reported by 14- and 15-year-olds

¹¹ These findings are based on 6 experiences detailed by young people aged 18 and over

¹² These findings are based on 24 experiences detailed by children 13 and under

This pattern suggests that while younger children often experienced police as calm, fair and protective, they felt rarely engaged in decision-making or offered choices, either because such involvement was limited or because decision-making was largely adult-led in these encounters.

Gender: Differences by gender in reported trust and procedural justice were present but modest, with substantial overlap between the boys' and girls' responses. Boys tended to rate police slightly more positively on safety and involvement, while girls were more positive about non-discrimination but more critical of fairness, involvement and choices.

Among the boys (52 experiences), 38.5% reported that police “did a good job” in keeping them safe, compared with 15.4% who reported negative experiences. Nearly half (46.2%) rated police positively for non-discrimination, and around one-third (32.7%) did so for fairness. Ratings were lower for involvement-related dimensions: 19.2% reported positive experiences of being involved in decisions, and 17.3% reported positive experiences of being offered choices, with negative ratings for choices reaching 25.0%.

The girls (16 experiences) showed a different pattern. A majority (56.2%) rated police positively on non-discrimination, with very few negative ratings (6.2%). However, only 25.0% rated police positively on fairness, while an equal proportion rated them negatively. Involvement-related items were more weakly rated: 12.5% reported positive experiences of involvement and choices, compared with 31.2% and 37.5%, respectively, reporting that police “didn’t do this well”. Perceptions of safety were also more mixed, with 25.0% positive and 18.8% negative ratings.

Very small numbers of respondents identifying as transgender or preferring not to say (two experiences) reported uniformly positive ratings across most dimensions, but these extreme scores reflect individual experiences and are not reliable for broader generalisation.

Neurodiversity: Neurodiversity differences were more pronounced than gender differences, with neurodivergent young people and those unsure about their neurodivergence generally reporting lower perceptions of police trustworthiness across several key dimensions, particularly in encounters that required interpretation, judgement or involvement.

Among the young people who identified as neurodivergent (16–21 experiences depending on the item), between 54–67% reported that police “did a good job” in relation to calmness (56.2%), fairness (64.7%) and non-discrimination (66.7%). However, a substantial minority reported negative experiences across these same domains, including 43.8% for calmness and 35.3% for fairness. The ratings of involvement in decisions were particularly polarised, with 54.5% rating this positively but 45.5% reporting that police “didn’t do this well”.

Young people who reported no neurodiversity (10–13 experiences) tended to give higher positive ratings overall, particularly for non-discrimination, where 92.3% reported that police “did a good job” and only 7.7% reported negative experiences. Positive ratings for calmness (76.9%) and fairness (70.0%) were

also higher in this group. However, involvement remained weak even here: only 40.0% reported positive experiences of involvement in decisions, with 60.0% rating it negatively.

Those who were unsure about their neurodivergence showed a broadly similar pattern to neurodivergent respondents, with moderate levels of positive endorsement for calmness (60.0%) and fairness (57.1%) but lower ratings for involvement (42.9% positive; 57.1% negative). While non-discrimination was rated positively by 88.9% of this group, uncertainty and negative ratings were more common across other procedural dimensions.

Care experience: A small number of the respondents with care experience provided detailed accounts of police contact. In total, 7 care-experienced participants contributed detail on 12 police experiences, meaning findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative.

Across these experiences, positive ratings were less common than among the respondents without care experience, particularly for respect and involvement in decision-making. Only about one-third of the care-experienced respondents reported that police “did a good job” treating them with respect, and just one-quarter reported positive experiences of being involved in decision-making. Perceptions of safety were more mixed, with most describing police as having kept them safe, alongside a minority reporting negative experiences.

In contrast, the respondents without care experience reported notably higher positive ratings for respect and safety, with involvement still rated more weakly but substantially more positively than among care-experienced respondents. Overall, while based on a small number of experiences, these findings suggest that care-experienced young people reported fewer positive experiences of respect and inclusion during police encounters.

Ethnicity: Differences by ethnicity should be interpreted with caution, as the sample was predominantly White British, and numbers for other ethnic groups were very small. Nevertheless, some indicative patterns can be identified.

Among White British young people (the largest group; 18–31 responses per item), ratings were generally moderate. Around 67.9% reported that police “did a good job” of treating them with respect, 62.5% of fairness and 64.3% of keeping them safe. Non-discrimination was the most positively rated dimension, with 83.9% reporting that police “did a good job”. By contrast, involvement in decisions was rated less positively: 44.4% reported good practice, while 55.6% reported that police “didn’t do this well”.

Responses from young people in minoritised ethnic groups were more variable and difficult to interpret due to very small numbers. For example:

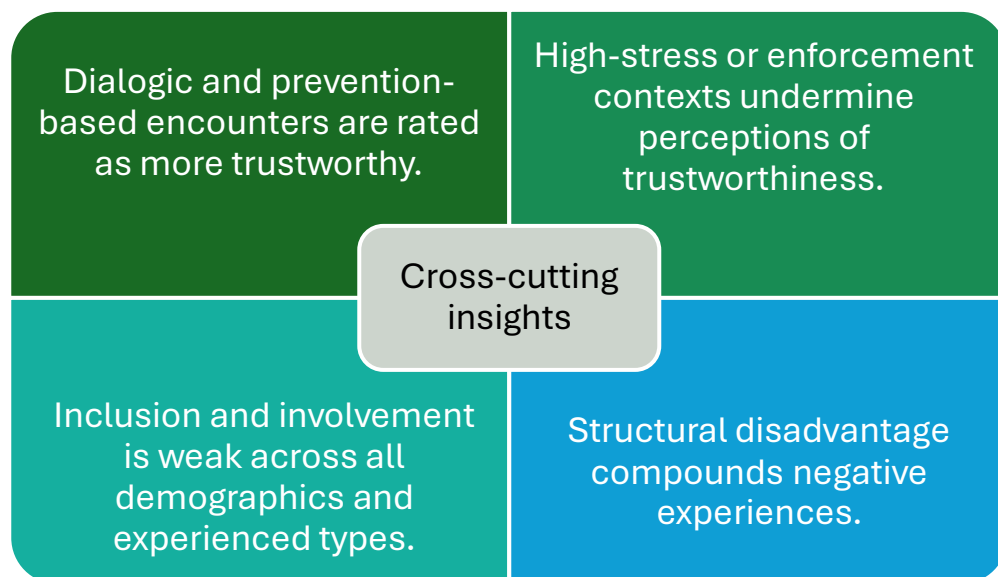
- Young people recorded as Black or Asian (one experience each) reported very positive ratings for respect and non-discrimination (100% “did a good job”), but in the Black group, 0% reported positive involvement, with 100% rating involvement negatively.

- Those in the Mixed Heritage group (two or three experiences) reported uniformly positive ratings across respect, fairness, safety and non-discrimination (100% “did a good job”), including for involvement, although the extremely small base limits interpretability.
- Young people grouped as Other ethnicity (four to seven experiences) showed lower and more mixed trust ratings. Only 40.0% reported positive experiences of respect and 42.9% reported positive experiences of non-discrimination, while 60–57% reported negative experiences in these areas. Involvement was rated particularly poorly, with just 20.0% reporting positive experiences and 80.0% reporting that police “didn’t do this well”.

Overall, while White British young people tended to report moderate trust with clear weaknesses around involvement, the responses from minoritised ethnic groups were more polarised. However, because these groups are underrepresented, the findings should be treated as illustrative rather than conclusive, underscoring the need for further research with larger, more diverse samples.

Cross-cutting chapter insights: Although these findings could not be tested for statistical significance, the descriptive patterns in this survey sample point to four broad themes in how young people assessed police trustworthiness. The diagram summarises these patterns: trust appeared to be strengthened in relational, preventive encounters, where interactions were calm, communicative and non-adversarial, while high-stress or enforcement-led situations were associated with lower ratings of fairness, calmness and safety. The data also suggest that inclusion and involvement were limited across most experiences, regardless of demographic group or encounter type. Finally, the patterns in the sample indicate that structural disadvantage may compound negative experiences, with groups such as neurodivergent and care-experienced young people often reporting lower trust across multiple aspects of police behaviour.

Figure 5.2: Insights on perceptions of trustworthiness in the survey sample



5.3 What builds trust?

While the quantitative survey data provide a high-level picture of how perceptions of police trustworthiness vary across encounter types, the qualitative accounts elicited through the focus groups, interviews and free-text survey responses detail how children and young people judge officer behaviour in the moment. These judgements focused on observable and immediate cues: how officers communicated, whether they explained what was happening, how they paced interactions and whether they appeared to prioritise welfare alongside enforcement.

Table 5.1 summarises the core behavioural patterns that children and young people consistently associate with officer trustworthiness. These same behavioural dimensions also structure the analysis that follows in Section 5.4, which examines how trustworthiness was undermined when these expectations were breached or absent.

The participants rarely described trust as something that accumulated gradually over time; instead, officer behaviour during a single encounter could rapidly strengthen or destabilise trust. Small, relational acts, such as calm explanation or human recognition, were experienced as trust-building, while dismissiveness, escalation or broken promises often had an immediate trust-eroding effect, sometimes within the same interaction.

The sections below examine how trustworthiness was built through officer behaviour across five interrelated domains – relational communication; recognition and human regard; clear explanation and follow-through; welfare-first, proportionate action; and advocacy and support – before turning to parallel patterns through which trustworthiness was eroded.

Table 5.1: Observable officer behaviours shaping children and young people’s judgements of trustworthiness

What builds trust	What erodes trust
Relational communication	Dismissive or judgemental tone
Recognition and human regard	Public embarrassment or exclusion
Clear explanation and follow-through	Unclear processes or broken promises
Welfare-first, proportional action	Escalation and unnecessary force
Advocacy and support	Delays, minimisation, neglect

Relational communication, recognition and human regard. The participants consistently emphasised the importance of being spoken to “normally”, in ways that were calm and non-judgemental and that recognised them as children first. Initial judgements of trustworthiness often began with small relational cues, both in routine encounters and in situations involving suspicion or enforcement.

One young person described a trusted officer as *“calm... relaxed... and wanted to help me”* (FG MX1). Another highlighted the value of ordinary conversation: *“They just wanted to listen to what you actually have to say”* (FG ND2). Even brief exchanges, such as friendly greetings during patrols, were described as trust-building when officers reciprocated everyday civility: *“I said, ‘Hello, you alright?’ and I was met with respect back”* (FG ND2).

These interactions were described as basic but meaningful indicators that an officer was approachable and well-intentioned. Judgements of trustworthiness were shaped less by formal authority and more by whether officers appeared human, respectful and attentive. This aligns with broader evidence that a calm tone, clear reasons and respectful communication support trust in both routine and enforcement encounters (Deuchar et al., 2019; Flacks, 2018).

Some participants also drew explicit comparisons with Liaison and Diversion staff, whose communication felt safer and more human. These practitioners were described as people who *“answered all the questions”, “explained what was going on”* and offered calm reassurance during custody (IV WJM1). Such examples reinforced that communication, which reduces uncertainty and acknowledges emotional impact, is central to judgements of trustworthiness.

Closely linked to communication were validation and human regard. The participants' accounts demonstrate that trust in an officer was more likely when young people felt emotionally recognised and believed. One participant contrasted a rare positive encounter with more dismissive experiences, explaining that the officer *"actually cared on a human level"* (FG MX1). Feeling seen and believed transformed the interaction, conveying safety and legitimacy in ways that procedural correctness alone could not. The scoping review similarly identified belief, emotional validation and humane gestures as distinctive mechanisms through which trustworthiness is established (Butterby & Hackett, 2021; The Children's Society, 2017).

Clarity, predictability and follow-through. Clear and consistent information-giving was a central feature of trust-building encounters. The participants judged officers as more trustworthy when processes, timeframes and next steps were explained in accessible ways that reduced uncertainty and helped them understand what would happen.

One young person described a supportive officer who *"took me aside... explained timelines... and gave me a contact"*, making the situation feel more manageable (IV WJM1). He also spoke positively about a custody sergeant who *"explained legalities in plain terms and checked understanding"*, transforming a stressful environment into one that felt more predictable.

Follow-through was equally important. Officers were judged as trustworthy when they did what they said they would do: calling back, providing updates or sticking to agreed arrangements. Although described as relatively rare, these actions signalled reliability within systems that often felt unpredictable. Importantly, trust was not dependent on certainty of outcome but on honesty and consistency. Across studies, predictable processes and regular updates, even in the absence of substantive progress, are repeatedly identified by children as markers of trustworthiness (Beckett & Warrington, 2015; McElvaney et al., 2024).

Welfare-first, proportionate and de-escalatory responses. Trustworthiness was strengthened when officers prioritised children's safety, comfort and emotional wellbeing over unnecessary enforcement. The participants assessed officers not only by what they did but by *how* they did it: pace, proportionality and sensitivity to vulnerability were critical.

One young person described being stopped while calm and compliant, with his hands visible, and while repeatedly stating he was not resisting. Despite this, an officer *"gripped my wrist hard and pulled me"* (IV BJM3), escalating the situation. He felt that a slower pace and more proportionate response would have avoided unnecessary conflict.

Welfare-first approaches, such as recognising when a child was calm, non-threatening or distressed, were experienced as reassuring and fair. The participants drew clear distinctions between officers who unnecessarily escalated and those who deliberately de-escalated. One child explained that they trusted an officer because of *"how calm he was... how relaxed he was"* (FG MX1).

These accounts illustrate that de-escalation, restraint in physical contact and patience are deeply relational practices. Conversely, premature escalation and the failure to recognise vulnerability undermined trust, particularly for children who were exploited, distressed or already subject to intensive policing, reflecting wider evidence on the unequal impacts of enforcement-led responses (Gearon, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019).

Presence beyond crisis, advocacy and child-centred support. The participants also described trust being built through officer presence outside moments of crisis and enforcement. Officers who were visible within communities in everyday, non-adversarial ways were perceived as more approachable and less intimidating. Examples from one group included *“police vs community football match... no crime at all that day”* (FG ND1) and familiar patrol officers who *“stop and talk to you, and you have a laugh with them”* or who drove patrol cars that *“everyone knew... they weren’t intimidating”* (FG ND1).

Some participants suggested that police could do more to engage in community life to reduce stereotyping and fear: *“Police can start doing community events... help stop stereotypes about younger people”* (FG ND2). Structured forums, such as Youth Independent Advisory Groups, were also identified as spaces where trust developed through continuity, mutual respect and visible follow-through. Existing research similarly shows that engagement approaches that emphasise communication and restoration beyond enforcement strengthen trust by treating young people as active participants rather than as objects of control (Payne et al., 2020; Selfridge et al., 2020).

Trustworthiness also increased when officers took concrete steps to support young people rather than merely “processing” them. Involving supportive professionals, such as Liaison and Diversion teams or National Health Service staff, was described as trust-building, with these practitioners acting as advocates within police processes. Small adjustments, such as allowing fresh air in custody or responding flexibly to anxiety, were experienced as attentive and humane, signalling care rather than control (Butterby & Hackett, 2021; McElvaney et al., 2024).

Although the participants did not use the term “trustworthiness”, their accounts consistently suggested that officers trained to work with children were judged as more trustworthy. Officers who demonstrated an understanding of development, trauma and communication needs were seen as better equipped to engage children safely and respectfully. These qualities were described as central to reducing fear and helping children feel recognised, supported and safe.

5.4 What erodes trustworthiness?

In contrast to the interactional behaviours that strengthened trustworthiness, the participants described a set of recurring practices that steadily eroded it. These were not experienced as isolated mistakes but as patterned responses that signalled to children and young people that their safety, dignity and perspectives were not priorities. Across the accounts, judgements of trustworthiness were undermined through three interconnected domains: interactional conduct, operational responses and systemic and environmental conditions. While analytically distinct, these domains frequently overlapped within the same encounters.

Interactional erosion: dismissiveness, judgement and exclusion. Trustworthiness was most immediately damaged by the relational climate officers created during encounters. The participants described behaviours such as coldness, irritation, judgement, dismissal, age-based minimisation and inappropriate communication as signals that they were unimportant or at fault.

Several young people recalled officers arriving *“looking like they’ve been forced to come”* (FG ND1), even during frightening incidents at home, or speaking in ways that felt sarcastic or perfunctory, as though the officers were *“just ticking boxes”* (FG ND1) rather than attending to their safety. These first impressions shaped whether an encounter felt safe or worth engaging in, with some young people describing withdrawing quickly when the tone felt judgemental.

In one particularly damaging interaction, a young person reporting sexual assault described being questioned in a stern, interrogative manner and asked, *“Did you lead them on?”* (FG ND1), leaving her feeling blamed rather than supported.

Public exposure further intensified these harms. Being questioned in front of peers or in busy public spaces heightened embarrassment and fear, as one girl recalled feeling *“embarrassed and scared”* with *“everyone watching”* (FG MX5). The participants identified privacy, slower pacing and choice over where conversations took place as key to protecting dignity.

A recurring concern involved officers speaking *about* young people rather than *with* them. The participants described being talked over or ignored, with questions directed to adults, carers or peers rather than young people themselves. As one put it: *“Don’t talk down to us... we still know what’s going on”* (FG-MX2). Younger children recalled crying or feeling frightened while officers spoke only to the accompanying adults, leaving them feeling invisible and unsafe.

Developmentally inappropriate communication compounded these effects. Younger participants described fast, formal or legalistic language, such as *“section this”* or *“statute that”* (FG MX1), which they found confusing. Others noted that when officers asked leading questions or stated assumptions, children sometimes repeated what officers suggested, not because it was accurate but because they felt pressured in stressful situations. As documented in the literature, dismissiveness, indirect engagement and age-based minimisation are common trust-eroding practices (Beckett et al., 2015; The Children’s Society, 2017).

Operational erosion: minimisation, delay, escalation and force. Beyond interactional conduct, trustworthiness was eroded by how police responded operationally to harm, risk or alleged wrongdoing. Many of the participants described serious concerns, such as domestic abuse, threats, harassment or assault, being downplayed, delayed or escalated inappropriately.

Several young people reported being told *“just put another log in”* (FG ND1) after reporting serious threats. In one case, an adult threatened to *“beat the shit out of me, my brother... and threaten[ed] to kill us”* (FG ND1). Another described prolonged abuse by an ex-partner, including threats to stab someone

and an attempted break in, with police attendance only occurring a week later, despite having messages as evidence.

Across these accounts, the participants described a pattern in which serious harm was both minimised and responded to slowly, conveying that their experiences were neither urgent nor significant. Being told to keep logging incidents, to “just wait” or that police “can’t do anything” shifted responsibility for safety back onto the children and young people themselves. As Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (2021) describe, such responses erode young people’s sense of *mattering*, the feeling that their safety and wellbeing are recognised as important.

Trustworthiness was also undermined through escalation and unnecessary force. Young people reported being grabbed, tightly handcuffed, shouted at or surrounded by multiple officers. One described being pinned to the floor “*despite pleading*” (IV WJM4), calling the experience terrifying. Others emphasised that what would have helped was slowing down, having fewer officers present and avoiding physicality when a child was already cooperative:

“Don’t be aggressive unless we’re resisting... if someone’s cooperating, you don’t need all of this” (FG BJM3).

“Would be better if they didn’t push you around as much” (IV BJM2).

Concerns about over-criminalisation were also prominent. Several young people described situations that escalated to arrest or detention that they felt could have been resolved through conversation. One participant recalled a friend being arrested and held overnight for standing on an outbuilding, suggesting that “*It was just an abandoned garage*” (FG BW1). Such responses were experienced as punitive and disproportionate, with lasting consequences.

A small number also reported that armed response deployments felt unnecessary. One young person recalled torches or firearms being pointed into vehicles as “*really intimidating... what if they’d had the wrong person?*” (IV WJM4). Others described police transport itself as frightening, including intense claustrophobia in vans prior to custody.

Systemic and environmental erosion: unreliability, lack of transparency and unsafe spaces.

Trustworthiness was further eroded when police systems appeared unreliable, inconsistent or unclear or when procedural requirements were not enacted. The cited examples included required stop-and-search receipts not always being provided and body-worn video not always being used: “*The camera wasn’t on... I asked them to turn it on*” (IV BJM3). Unlogged encounters and administrative errors further undermined confidence. One young person said that officers took their details but “*didn’t put it in the system*” (IV BJM3). Another recalled police recording the wrong address on paperwork, leading to a neighbour opening sensitive correspondence: “*They put the wrong house number... our neighbour opened it*” (IV WJM1). This young person went on to describe how this incident was followed by months during which “*no one was on my case*” (IV WJM1).

Other participants described promises that were not kept, including missed welfare checks or call-backs: *“I wasn’t checked hourly as they said... I passed out”* (IV WJM2). These procedural failures were experienced as patterned. As one participant reflected, *“There are great individual officers, but the core needs to change... if you fucked up, just say sorry”* (FG MX6).

As outlined in Chapter 4, custody environments were frequently described as physically and emotionally distressing. In terms of trustworthiness, what mattered most was how officers responded to vulnerability within these settings. The lack of basic provisions, paired with delayed or absent care, reduced trustworthiness. In the most acute accounts, young people described experiencing severe distress while alone in cells, including a self-harm attempt. One participant recalled that staff responded only after he kicked the door, focusing on warnings about fines rather than on his safety. Such experiences reinforced the perception that control and compliance were prioritised over welfare at moments of great vulnerability.

Interview environments could also feel punitive, even when young people were reporting experiences of harm to the police. One young person described being taken into *“just a white room with a table... like you’re being interrogated for murder”* (FG ND1) and being refused a female officer despite one being present. Another recalled feeling *“like I was the issue... [the] atmosphere was just bad”* (FG ND1).

Finally, practices beyond face-to-face encounters also shaped trustworthiness. The participants described unease about information-sharing between agencies, often without explanation, leaving them feeling exposed, *“because of a Section 84¹³”* (FG MX6). One group spoke about digital contact, which raised similar concerns with uncertainty about who managed accounts, how disclosures were handled and how safeguarding information would be shared (FG MX4).

5.5 Trust: the experiences of Black and Mixed Heritage young people

Accounts from Black and Mixed Heritage young people revealed how race shaped assessments of police trustworthiness both within encounters and before contact occurred.

Direct experiences of racialised suspicion and escalation. Among the Black and Mixed Heritage participants, experiences of policing were repeatedly and explicitly attributed to race. The participants described routine encounters in which suspicion, escalation and force were experienced as racially determined rather than situational. One Mixed Heritage young person described repeated stops and harassment, including racial abuse: *“They just drive by and stop me... or call me N... and chase me”* (IV BJM1).

Another described being stopped and treated as a robbery suspect despite not matching the description provided and despite a bystander intervening to tell officers they had the wrong person. In reflecting on

¹³ **Section 84 of the Children Act 1989** provides statutory power for public authorities, including the police, to disclose information to local authorities where this is necessary to support a local authority’s functions in relation to children, including safeguarding and welfare. Information may be shared without the child’s or family’s consent where disclosure is considered necessary and proportionate, which can be experienced by children and young people as opaque if not clearly explained.

why he believed police suspicion persisted, he explained: *“Just because you’ve got a brown face, basically”* (IV BJM3).

In these accounts, trustworthiness was undermined from the outset. Being approached in a manner that framed a child or young person as dangerous or guilty signalled to the participants that the officers were not acting neutrally or fairly. Calmness, compliance or attempts to explain were described as having little effect on police responses, reinforcing the perception that trustworthiness was not judged behaviourally but racially.

Differential treatment and adultification. Several of the young Black male participants explicitly compared their treatment with that of White peers, reinforcing perceptions that standards of proportionality and restraint were not applied consistently. One participant described officers interacting casually with White young people while treating Black peers more harshly: *“I’ve seen White kids in town get stopped and searched... they’re laughing and joking with them... where’s the laughing and joking with me?”* (IV BJM3).

Others described being chased, restrained or physically handled despite doing nothing wrong: *“Police chased me down an alleyway when I was doing nothing... my Nan had to come and stop them”* (IV BJM1).

These comparisons shaped judgements of trustworthiness in two ways: they signalled unequal standards of policing, and they undermined confidence that calm or compliant behaviour would be recognised or reciprocated. Officer behaviour was perceived as predetermined rather than responsive.

Some participants also explicitly identified adultification as a racialised pattern. Black young people, particularly those in mid-to-late adolescence, described being treated as older, more culpable or more threatening than their White peers. One participant recalled: *“She’s 17, but they spoke to her like she was grown”* (FG BW1). Another reflected, *“They hammer you... I look like a criminal to them”* (IV BJM2).

Adultification was seen to remove the protections typically afforded to children, such as patience, explanation and welfare-first responses. When officers treated young people as adults or as inherently suspect, the participants interpreted this as evidence that policing was neither fair nor caring, further undermining trustworthiness.

Anticipatory mistrust and emotional withdrawal. Repeated racialised encounters reshaped expectations about policing beyond individual officers. Some young people described emotional withdrawal as a coping strategy: *“Now when they pull me, and I’m in the cell, I just go sleep”* (IV BJM2). Others expressed a sense of inevitability: *“They always think we are doing bad”* (IV BJM1). Here, trust was not assessed at the point of encounter but in advance. Previous racialised experiences produced anticipatory mistrust, an expectation that fairness, empathy or proportionality were not forthcoming. Trustworthiness was judged before contact occurred.

Anticipatory and comparative perspectives among Black young women. In contrast to some other participants, Black young women who participated were less likely to recount direct, personal experiences of racialised policing. However, this absence of direct contact did not equate to neutrality.

Instead, race shaped their judgements of police trustworthiness through anticipation, comparison and moral evaluation, with trust assessed at a distance rather than through personal interaction.

Rather than narrating what police had done to them, the participants explored how officers *might* behave when race was implicated, particularly under conditions of institutional pressure. One young woman offered a hypothetical scenario to test police ethical accountability, imagining a situation in which a Black officer witnessed a colleague racially targeting someone but did not intervene. In reflecting on this possibility, she questioned whether organisational loyalty would override moral responsibility:

“Let’s say I’m being racially targeted by a White police officer, and there’s a Black police officer standing right beside him, and they’re not doing anything. It kind of feels like, okay, is the badge worth more than you as a human being?” (FG BW1).

The participants also drew on vicarious exposure to racialised police violence, particularly via social media and US-based policing, to explain why trust felt fragile despite limited direct engagement with UK police. Although some explicitly distinguished between British and American policing, they emphasised that constant exposure to racialised harm circulating online shaped how police power was imagined and anticipated:

“I don’t think UK police as a whole are that bad, but when you compare it to what’s happening in America – because we’re all on social media – you constantly see all these bad things happening over there. Somehow that affects how you see the police as a whole, no matter where you are” (FG BW1).

Importantly, the participants reflected on a lack of visible distinction or reassurance from British institutions in the wake of highly publicised racialised violence elsewhere. One participant reflected that the absence of explicit institutional positioning itself undermined trust:

“British police haven’t really set themselves apart from the negative press American police are getting. It’s not like they’ve come out and said, ‘We’re not like that’. At least, I haven’t seen it” (FG BW1).

These accounts show that for the Black young women who participated in this study, trustworthiness was not embedded in direct encounters but constructed through anticipatory reasoning, comparative judgements and evaluations of institutional ethics and accountability. Trust was assessed through perceived coherence between stated values and observed or imagined practices and through judgements about whether fairness and protection would extend to racially minoritised people in moments of vulnerability. In this sense, trustworthiness operated as a forward-looking, morally weighted judgement rather than as a retrospective assessment of experience.

The survey data provided contextual support for these qualitative accounts. While the numbers were small, when asked if their experiences had changed their views of the police, Mixed Heritage respondents were more likely to report that their experiences had made them view the police more negatively, and none reported viewing the police more positively as a result. White British respondents,

by contrast, reported more mixed outcomes. Notably, ethnic differences were more visible in the overall changes in the views of the police than in the responses to individual procedural justice items, suggesting that trustworthiness was assessed cumulatively rather than through isolated interactions.

5.6 Trust: the experiences of children and young people who are neurodivergent or have special educational needs and disabilities

The neurodivergent participants and those with SEND described many of the same policing contexts as others who took part in the study, but their experiences were shaped by distinct and compounding sensory, cognitive and communication barriers. For this group, judgements of police trustworthiness were undermined by environments, interaction styles and procedural responses that failed to accommodate their needs. The participants were clear that neurodivergence-aware adjustments were central to safe, fair and trustworthy policing rather than optional or exceptional measures.

Sensory overload and the pace of encounters. Sensory overwhelm was a dominant theme. Young people described how noise, bright lights, close proximity and unpredictability could rapidly trigger panic, shutdown or meltdowns. One participant recalled being transported in a police van with a *“hard wooden bench... extremely overwhelming for an autistic young person”* (FG ND1). Others described becoming unable to speak when overwhelmed: *“When I get really overwhelmed or scared, I shut down... I won’t speak”* (FG BW1).

Interaction styles that, though not ideal, may be manageable for neurotypical children, such as rapid questioning, raised voices or sudden entry into homes, were experienced as particularly destabilising. The participants explained the need for time, reduced sensory input and physical space to regulate before answering even simple questions. As one young person put it, *“For a neurodivergent person, it can be absolutely terrifying... even being spoken to in the street”* (FG BW1). In these situations, trustworthiness was closely linked to officers’ ability to slow encounters and reduce sensory demand.

Misinterpretation of neurodivergent behaviour. The participants repeatedly described neurodivergent behaviours, such as freezing, avoiding eye contact, fidgeting, becoming non-verbal or retreating, as being misinterpreted by officers as defiance, rudeness or aggression. One young person explained that *“when you’re having a meltdown... hands-on restraint just makes it worse... You don’t want to be touched”* (FG MX2). Another recalled being warned that repeated meltdowns could be treated as re-offending, with severe consequences: *“If I ‘reoffended’ (meaning [had] another meltdown)... I’d end up in jail... which will be fatal”* (FG MX2).

Rather than pausing or adapting, the participants described officers escalating responses by raising their voices, increasing the number of officers present or using handcuffs in response to behaviours that were self-regulatory rather than threatening. These responses signalled a lack of understanding of neurodivergent distress. As one participant summarised, *“It’s important police know de-escalation; going hands-on immediately just gets you more riled up”* (FG MX2).

Custody as destabilising and poorly adapted. As described in Chapter 4, custody environments were widely experienced as intimidating for neurodivergent children and young people, with these conditions often being actively destabilising. The participants reported missed medication, long periods without welfare checks and limited adjustments for sensory or communication needs. One young person described how missing ADHD medication because staff *“didn’t give it [to] me... they completely forgot about me”* significantly heightened anxiety and distress (FG ND2). Others emphasised the importance of a familiar or trusted adult, not simply for reassurance but to support regulation and communication: *“Let us sit with a guardian or supportive officer, not isolated in a cell”* (IV WJM2). Where such support was denied, trust in police responses diminished rapidly.

Communication barriers and inaccessible processes. Communication breakdowns were common during interviews and reporting. Some children described shutting down entirely under stress: *“I had to report a violent offence... I was unable to speak as I shut down”* (FG BW1). The participants suggested simple, practical adjustments, such as visual prompts or communication cards, to support interaction when speech became difficult. These were offered illustratively to convey the need for low-demand alternatives rather than specific tools.

Young people with ADHD highlighted the need for movement or fidget tools during interviews: *“I have to be doing something... I start losing my temper just sitting there”* (IV WJM2). Others stressed the importance of age-appropriate and separate custody spaces, explaining that proximity to adults intensified fear and shutdown responses.

Exclusion of carers and disproportionate responses. Several autistic participants described meltdowns being misread as intoxication, violence or non-compliance, leading to restraint despite clear verbal requests such as *“Please don’t touch me”* (FG MX3). Others described being separated from carers or trusted adults whose de-escalation strategies were ignored. For these young people, the exclusion of carers was especially harmful because the carers often held the only effective means of supporting regulation and communication. In some participants’ accounts, meltdowns were misinterpreted as domestic violence or criminal behaviour, resulting in unsafe and disproportionate responses. These experiences further undermined trust, reinforcing perceptions that police did not recognise neurodivergence or act in ways that protected children’s wellbeing.

5.7 Intersectional observations

Intersectionality refers to the ways in which social identities, such as race, disability, gender and class, intersect to shape experiences of power and inequality (Crenshaw, 1989). Although participants in this study held diverse and intersecting identities, these dimensions were not routinely discussed in combination. Instead, identity was typically raised along a single axis, for example, through accounts of racism or neurodivergence, without participants themselves drawing connections between different aspects of identity. As a result, while the dataset contains rich accounts of lived experience, it does not support a detailed intersectional analysis grounded in participants’ own articulations. This is likely shaped both by topic and method. Group-based settings may have discouraged disclosure of more personal or layered identity experiences, and the ethical emphasis on voluntary sharing and participant

comfort may have further limited such discussion. For these reasons, identity-related findings should be interpreted with care. While the data offer important insights into trust, safety and policing, they do not capture the full complexity of how intersecting identities shape these experiences.

5.8 Concluding observations and insights

This chapter examined how children and young people assess police trustworthiness within encounters and how these judgements shape the development or erosion of trust. Across accounts, officers were judged as trustworthy when they acted in calm, respectful and human ways: explaining what was happening, communicating clearly, pacing interactions at a manageable speed, listening without judgement and following through on commitments. Conversely, trustworthiness was undermined by dismissiveness, assumptions, unclear or inconsistent processes, unsafe or exposing environments and unnecessary escalation. Even brief moments of raised voices, abrupt engagement or the presence of multiple officers could rapidly signal a lack of care or fairness.

Experiences of trustworthiness were not uniform across groups. Black and Mixed Heritage young people described trust as being particularly fragile due to prior experiences of racialised suspicion, adultification and disproportionate escalation, which shaped their expectations before encounters began. Neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND identified distinct harms arising from sensory overload, rapid pacing and the misinterpretation of neurodivergent behaviour. For these groups, trust was more likely to develop when officers slowed interactions, reduced sensory and environmental demands, accommodated alternative forms of communication and involved trusted adults where appropriate.

These findings show that trust is not an abstract belief but an outcome of situational, relational judgements of trustworthiness made in real time. Whether trust was strengthened or eroded depended on how police behaviour aligned with the children's expectations of fairness, safety and care – implications that are explored further in Chapters 7 and 8.

Cross-cutting chapter insights

- 1. Children judge trust through behaviour.** Children and young people rarely talked about “trust in the police” as an institution. Instead, they assessed how individual officers acted in the moment: their tone, clarity, fairness, predictability and child-sensitivity.
- 2. Trust is dynamic and quickly altered.** Even small interactional cues, such as a calm explanation or a rushed assumption, can rapidly strengthen or undermine trustworthiness during an encounter.
- 3. Identity powerfully shapes how trustworthiness is experienced.** Black and Mixed Heritage young people and those who are neurodivergent or who have SEND described distinct patterns, such as treatment that can be described as adultification, misinterpretation of behaviour or sensory overwhelm. These made it harder to build trust and easier to lose it.
- 4. Trustworthiness rests on emotional safety.** Children feel able to trust when officers create conditions that reduce fear, confusion and unpredictability; when these conditions are absent, trust is harmed regardless of procedural correctness.

Chapter 6. *“It’s alright for them [to say] ‘we listen to you’... but does it go any further?”*¹⁴: Where do children feel heard (and not heard) in police encounters?

6.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses **RQ3: How can police better listen to children?** It examines when and how children feel able to express their views, needs and concerns to police; whether they feel they are being listened to; and what makes speaking feel safe, meaningful or worthwhile. The chapter also explores how experiences of voice differ for Black and racially minoritised children and young people and for those who are neurodivergent or have SEND and considers what supports better listening in these contexts.

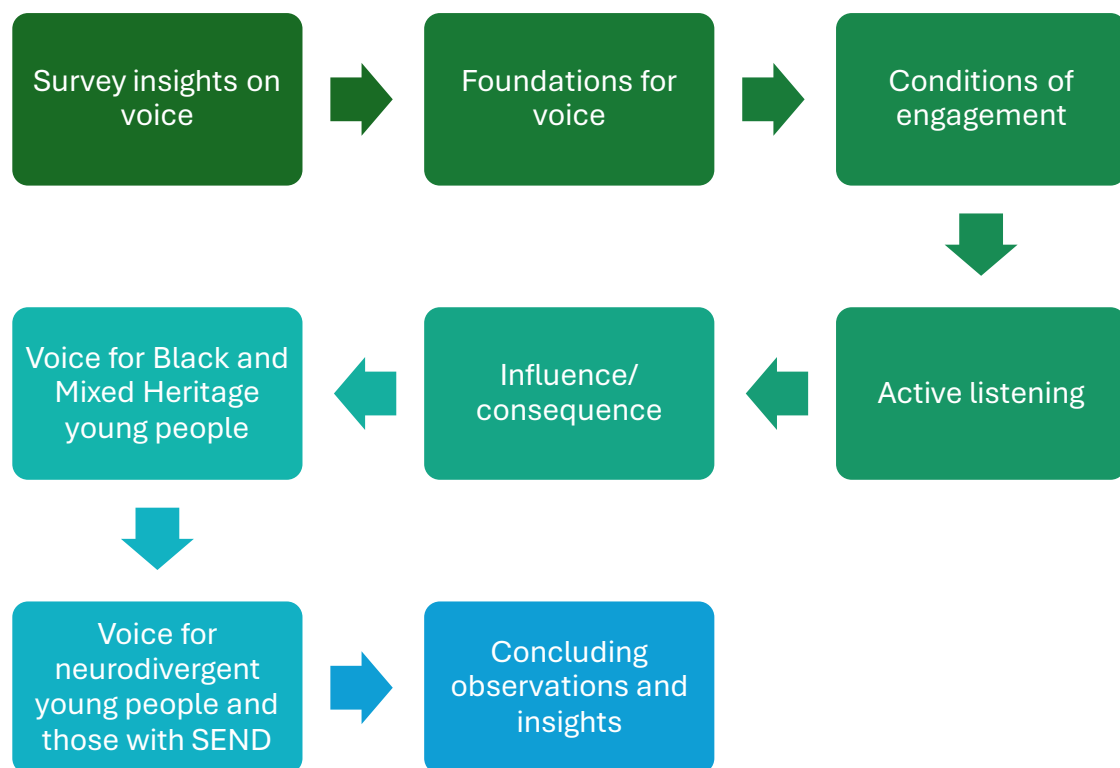
Building on Chapter 5, which examined trustworthiness as the behavioural and relational conditions that shape whether encounters feel safe, fair and predictable, this chapter focuses on voice as a closely connected but analytically distinct element of children and young people’s experiences. In procedural justice theory, voice is understood as both a component of perceived fairness and a mechanism by which people judge whether authority is exercised with care and good intentions (Tyler & Mentovich, 2023). Our findings suggest a reciprocal relationship: trustworthiness creates the conditions in which children feel able to speak, while children experiencing their views as heard and taken seriously reinforces feelings of fairness and safety.

Across the qualitative data, children and young people described voice as far broader than verbal speech. Voice encompassed their ability to communicate in ways that reflected their developmental stage, communication needs, sensory profile or emotional state, including situations in which speaking aloud was not possible or felt unsafe. In this sense, voice emerged as a relational and procedural experience, shaped not only by what children attempted to say but by whether officers recognised, interpreted and responded appropriately to their cues, behaviours, preferences or advocacy from trusted adults.

To capture this complexity, the chapter is structured around four analytically distinct but interconnected dimensions of voice: foundations for voice, conditions of engagement, active listening and influence or consequence. Together, these dimensions illuminate where and how children’s voices are enabled, constrained or silenced in police encounters.

¹⁴ This is a quote from a young person in group FG ND1.

Figure 6.1: A roadmap of the chapter



6.2 Survey insights on voice

Across all types of police contact, only a minority of young people felt they had meaningful opportunities to express themselves. In the survey, young people were asked two questions directly related to voice: whether police “let me share my views” and whether police “saw things from my point of view”. Of the 61 respondents who answered whether police let them share their views, only 31% rated police as doing “a good job”, and 23% felt officers “did a good job” in understanding or taking their perspectives into account. These proportions were lowest in encounters such as arrests, questioning or stop and searches, where “didn’t do this well” was the most common response.

In low-key or indirect encounters, such as seeing police in the neighbourhood, hearing an assembly-style talk in school or having experiences without direct interaction, young people were more likely to select “don’t know” or “not sure”. While we cannot determine their reasoning from the survey alone, it is plausible that some respondents chose these options because the nature of these encounters did not involve any invitation to speak or because voice was not relevant or expected in that context.

Overall, the survey results indicate that opportunities for voice are inconsistent, often absent and shaped by the nature of the contact. These quantitative patterns align closely with the qualitative accounts presented in this chapter, in which children described voice as something that must be actively created rather than assumed to be present.

Survey insights

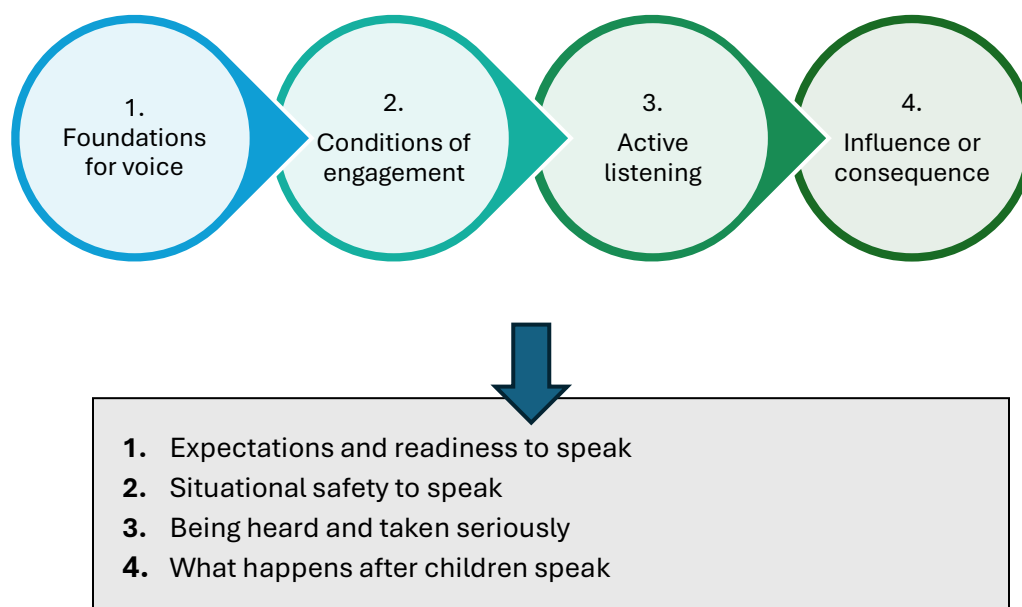
- Demographic patterns are modest, and no group reported consistently positive voice experiences.
- Age 16 shows the most negative patterns (likely due to more adversarial interactions). Boys reported poorer perspective-taking than girls.
- Although the number of Mixed Heritage respondents was small (four in total), their responses suggested that they felt able to speak during police encounters but did not necessarily feel understood or that officers saw things from their point of view. When compared with White British respondents (n=53), respondents from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (Asian, Black African and “Other”; combined n=11) were more likely to select “didn’t do this well” on the perspective-taking item, and few selected positive response options. Given the very small subgroup size, this pattern cannot be generalised, but it aligns with qualitative accounts of feeling less understood or taken seriously during police encounters.
- Neurodivergent young people show the widest spread: more positive AND more negative experiences, consistent with qualitative findings about sensory/communication needs and misinterpretation.
- Disabled respondents show slightly more positive recognition but also uncertainty.
- Many of the descriptive differences across demographic groups appear small, and the type of police contact shows the clearest patterning in responses to voice-related items.

Although free-text survey comments on voice were limited, a small number echoed the patterns identified by the participants in the focus groups and interviews. Some respondents noted being unable to speak at all: e.g. police “*don’t let u speak*” (FG MX3), while others described wanting more opportunities for two-way or one-to-one interaction. Most comments related to low-key or non-interactive encounters, such as school talks or brief exchanges, in which young people felt there was little space to contribute. The only explicitly negative account came from an enforcement-led encounter, reinforcing the qualitative finding that voice is most constrained where power differentials are strongest.

6.3 The four dimensions of voice

Drawing directly on the participants’ accounts, and to have these views given due consideration, we conceptualise children and young people’s ability to express views about matters that affect them as involving four interconnected dimensions within police encounters. These interconnected dimensions are set out in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2: The four dimensions of voice



Although derived inductively from the children and young people’s accounts, these dimensions align closely with the Lundy Model of participation (2007), which frames children’s voice in terms of *Space, Voice, Audience* and *Influence*. *Foundations for voice* captures the preconditions that shape readiness to engage; *conditions of engagement* reflect the environmental and relational supports needed to speak; *active listening* addresses whether children’s views are genuinely heard and taken seriously; and *influence or consequence* highlights that voice becomes meaningful only when it has impact or clear follow-through. These dimensions demonstrate how voice in policing is both situational and cumulative, shaped by prior experience, interactional practices and the consequences that follow when children speak.

6.3.1 Foundations for voice

Children’s and young people’s ability to speak, correct misunderstandings or articulate needs during police encounters was strongly shaped by the context they brought into the encounters. The contexts included prior exposure to policing, wider community narratives and the frequency or nature of earlier interactions. These experiences informed expectations about whether speaking would be safe, worthwhile or effective. Unlike the interactional behaviours examined in Chapter 5, this dimension concerns the *pre-interaction assumptions* that determine whether children and young people enter encounters ready to speak, hesitant or already silent.

The participants described how familiarity and predictability influenced their readiness to communicate. Where police presence was experienced as routine and non-crisis-focused, some young people felt more able to approach officers, ask questions or raise concerns. As one group explained, consistent, everyday visibility made officers feel more approachable: “*See them in your community... over time, you get used to them. It feels normal instead of ‘something’s going on’*” (FG ND1). Similarly, predictable and

relational presence in schools or youth settings allowed some young people to imagine speaking openly or disclosing concerns: *“I’d want the police to come into schools and have one-to-one convos... so we have the opportunity to disclose something”* (FG MX6).

However, these foundations were uneven. For some of the younger participants, police presence, particularly in schools, was interpreted primarily as signalling danger or wrongdoing, producing caution and withdrawal rather than openness: *“When they walk past, you’re very closed... you think something’s wrong”* (FG MX1).

Beyond familiarity, many young people described entering encounters with expectations that their voices would not be taken seriously. Age-based minimisation shaped anticipatory judgements about whether speaking would make a difference. One participant summarised this pattern bluntly: *“People think you don’t know what you’re talking about... they treat you differently if you are a child”* (FG MX2). This experience of epistemic injustice (having one’s account discounted because of age, identity or status) functioned as a powerful deterrent to speaking. As others similarly explained:

“They almost don’t listen to a young person because they’re a young person” (FG MX3).

“They judge you on the fact you’re youths... It’s not worth their time listening to you” (FG ND1).

Foundations for voice were also shaped by practical knowledge. Young people with limited prior contact described uncertainty about how to communicate with police or navigate reporting processes, which reduced their confidence in speaking at all: *“We aren’t taught how to report lower-level crimes... no one told me how it worked”* (FG ND1).

These accounts show that foundations for voice are not simply a matter of trust, nor are they reducible to interactional behaviour within encounters. Instead, they represent the cognitive, relational and experiential backdrop that determines whether children and young people approach police contact feeling able, willing and safe enough to speak. These foundations shape communicative readiness and set the conditions for how subsequent interactional dynamics, listening practices and outcomes are experienced in police encounters.

6.3.2 Conditions of engagement

The participants reflected that even when children and young people wanted to speak during police encounters, their ability to do so depended on the immediate conditions of the interactions. These conditions shaped their ability to process information, regulate emotion, form words and judge whether speaking felt safe or risky. Across accounts, the participants described four interrelated features that either enabled or constrained voice in the moment: opening cues and tone; clarity and pace of communication; sensory and environmental conditions; and professionals’ ability to notice, understand and respond to young people’s emotional and communicative cues over time.

Opening cues and interactional tone. The participants consistently described the opening moments of an encounter as decisive. Calm, invitational openings, such as officers checking how a young person

was, asking what had happened or signalling readiness to listen, created early permission to speak: *“Having that open conversation... asking is there anything they can support them with”* (FG ND2).

By contrast, abrupt, accusatory or intimidating approaches immediately closed down opportunities for voice, triggering withdrawal or silence. Young people were explicit that tone mattered as much as content: *“If you seem intimidating, I’m not going to talk to you”* (FG MX4).

Clarity, pacing and developmentally appropriate communication. The participants’ contributions clearly indicated that voice depended on understandable, appropriately paced communication. Legalistic or adult-centred language left many young people confused or overwhelmed, undermining their ability to respond meaningfully: *“They speak in a police manner... you don’t know what it means”* (FG MX1).

The participants also emphasised the importance of having time to think and process. Rapid questioning, leading prompts or sudden shifts in tone were experienced as overwhelming, particularly for younger and neurodivergent young people: *“If they’re saying words you don’t understand, you won’t tell them anything”* (FG MX4).

Sensory, environmental and contextual safety. The physical and social environment of police encounters strongly shaped whether young people felt able to speak. Public settings, especially when peers were present, produced fear of judgement and exposure: *“When it was all in public... you just keep quiet”* (FG ND1). The participants described having a greater capacity to speak when officers reduced stimuli, such as by moving to quieter spaces, lowering voices or limiting who was present: *“Bring the person to a quieter place to have more sensitive discussions”* (FG MX5).

Bright, clinical interview rooms, close physical proximity or multiple officers speaking at once were described as inhibiting voice by increasing anxiety and cognitive overload, leaving little emotional or mental space to speak.

Relational attunement, advocacy and continuity. Young people were more able to use their voices when officers demonstrated attunement and understanding, particularly when they acknowledged lived experience or vulnerability. Some of the participants described finding it easier to speak with officers they perceived as relatable or socially aware, noting when this wasn’t present: *“You feel like you’re talking to a wall... they’ve never had to go through it”* (FG ND1).

Continuity also mattered. Having to repeat accounts to multiple officers discouraged communication and reduced confidence that speaking was worthwhile: *“I’d built rapport with one officer... then they sent someone else”* (FG ND1).

When officers showed advocacy by helping young people express themselves, clarifying their accounts or ensuring their perspectives were understood, voice became more feasible. When such attunement was absent, even motivated children described becoming silent.

6.3.3 Active listening

The children and young people's accounts made clear that voice was not simply the act of speaking but the experience of being genuinely attended to and taken seriously. Active listening was therefore central to whether voice felt meaningful and whether young people felt able or willing to continue speaking. The moments the participants felt listened to were marked by clear interactional cues: sustained attention, appropriate pacing, follow-up questions and signs that officers had understood what was being said. As one young person explained, what mattered was *"someone who actually understands you and is willing to listen"* (FG MX2). Where these cues were present, young people described feeling recognised and able to communicate more fully.

Listening as recognition and validation. For many of the participants, listening was inseparable from the concept of epistemic recognition, the sense that their accounts carried weight and would not be dismissed because of their age, identity or communication style. As outlined in the foundations for voice, many young people entered encounters expecting not to be taken seriously. These expectations were either confirmed or disrupted through officers' listening practices.

Several young people described situations in which their perspectives were excluded from the outset by procedural choices. One recalled officers relying solely on CCTV footage without engaging with them directly: *"They didn't even talk to me... they just looked at the CCTV"* (FG ND1). In such cases, listening was absent not as a matter of inattention but because the young person's account was treated as irrelevant.

When officers demonstrated validation, for example, by acknowledging feelings, pacing the interaction and responding attentively, young people described feeling able to speak more openly. Comparisons across the encounters showed that listening was actively assessed by children and young people over time, shaping whether future attempts to use voice were perceived as worthwhile.

Listening as engaged and responsive interaction. The participants described active listening as reciprocal rather than passive. It involved officers asking clarifying questions, checking understanding and demonstrating interest in young people's explanations: *"...wanting to know what's happening"* (FG MX2). When follow-up was absent or explanations were cut short, young people interpreted officers as being disinterested or dismissive, often withdrawing from further communication, suggesting that engagement could have been improved: *"If they'd just heard him out for five minutes..."* (FG BW1).

Active listening also involved allowing space for expression, particularly when young people were distressed or overwhelmed. When officers slowed interactions and allowed emotional expression, the participants reported being better able to communicate clearly and safely.

Direct address and inclusion. Across discussions, young people emphasised the importance of being addressed directly rather than spoken about to accompanying adults. Being sidelined felt like an erasure of voice and autonomy: *"He looked at me, ignored me and went straight to my parents"* (FG MX1). When

officers addressed young people directly, the participants described feeling acknowledged as individuals whose perspectives mattered, what some referred to as “*permission to speak*” (FG MX5).

These accounts show that active listening functioned as a critical gateway between the opportunity to speak and meaningful participation. When listening was attentive, validating and inclusive, young people were more able to express themselves; when it was absent or procedural, their voices were constrained or withdrawn.

6.3.4 Influence or consequence

Children and young people were clear that voice became meaningful only when it led to recognition, action or change. Speaking without influence, whether because what they said had been ignored, contradicted or sidelined, was experienced not simply as disappointing but as silencing. This dimension captures how children judged whether their contributions carried any weight and whether it was safe or worthwhile to use their voices in future encounters.

Across the dataset, two recurring patterns shaped these judgements:

1. attempts to speak that led nowhere
2. attempts to speak that resulted in negative consequences.

Both patterns had lasting effects on willingness to engage.

When voice goes nowhere. Many young people described trying to correct misunderstandings or provide important information, only to find that their contributions made no difference to decisions or actions. These experiences were not abstract evaluations of policing but direct encounters with futility. As one participant explained: “*If there’s a child that’s telling you, ‘No, that’s not what happened’... they just automatically shut you down and jump to assumptions*” (FG MX6). Others described more routine patterns of override, in which suggestions or explanations were dismissed without engagement: “*If you say something or suggest something, they just automatically shut you down*” (FG MX4).

In some cases, the participants described situations in which their accounts were not only disregarded but also actively contradicted by police actions. One young person recalled explicitly taking responsibility for an incident, only for officers to act on gendered assumptions instead: “*I sat in front of her and said, ‘I assaulted him’... but they put him in handcuffs because he was a man*” (FG MX4).

When speaking carries risk. Young people also described situations in which using their voices led to emotional, social or procedural harm, reinforcing silence as a protective strategy. A neurodivergent participant described clearly communicating sensory boundaries that were ignored: “*If I’m saying, ‘Please don’t touch me’..., and then they touch me...*” (FG MX3).

Rather than reducing distress, attempts to communicate needs sometimes escalated encounters, leading children to conclude that speaking was unsafe. Others described how misinterpretations during police encounters could produce lasting consequences unrelated to what they had said. In one case, a

minor property incident escalated unnecessarily, resulting in long-term educational consequences for the young person involved.

Concerns about consequences also shaped group dynamics. Some young people described withholding information entirely when peers were present, fearing reputational harm or suspicion: “...*people will think you’ve done something*” (FG MX1). Others worried that speaking publicly could lead to judgement or exposure through recording or circulation: “*When it was all in public... videos going round the school... you just keep quiet*” (FG ND1).

What influence looks like. Although accounts of failed influence were most common, some young people described responses that signalled their voice had mattered. Influence was experienced when officers acknowledged what had been said, explained next steps, acted on requests or made clear how a child’s contribution shaped decisions.

One group described influence as the point at which participation becomes meaningful: “*Being able to actually have an input that is listened to... and changes being made*” (FG MX2). Practical examples reinforced this distinction.

Across these accounts, influence was judged not by outcome alone but by whether the children could see a clear connection between what they said and what happened next.

6.4 Voice: the experiences of Black and Mixed Heritage young people

Black and Mixed Heritage young people’s accounts show how opportunities for voice were shaped and often constrained by racialised assumptions, interactional conditions and expectations about how police would respond. Across their accounts, each stage of voice was experienced as fragile: opportunities to speak were limited or overridden, conditions often felt unsafe or exposing, listening was undermined by dismissal or irritation and the consequences of speaking did little to alter outcomes. Together, these dynamics reduced the likelihood that Black young people felt able or safe to express themselves during police encounters.

Restricted opportunities for voice were evident at the outset of encounters. Some young people described attempting to explain what had happened, only to be dismissed or treated as suspects regardless. One Mixed Heritage young person described being stopped in relation to a reported knife incident and repeatedly stating that it was not him, pointing out clear discrepancies yet not being believed:

“I was telling them it wasn’t me... you can ask the shop owners, I’d been in there the whole time... but they just cuffed me straight away” (IV BJM2).

Others described anticipating dismissal and recognising that speaking would not be taken seriously.

Conditions also played a central role in shaping voice. Many encounters took place in public, involved sudden physical contact or escalated quickly, leaving little space to speak. Several young people

described being grabbed, cuffed or handled roughly even while calm and compliant, undermining any sense that explanation or dialogue was possible:

“I wasn’t resisting, I wasn’t shouting... I was speaking nice and calmly. He just gripped my wrist hard and pulled me” (IV BJM1).

For Black young women and some Mixed Heritage young people, concerns about exposure or information being shared added further risk to speaking openly, particularly when contact risked being escalated to parents or other authorities.

The quality of listening was frequently described as limited or hostile. Even when young people tried to engage calmly, they reported being ignored, spoken over or treated with irritation, especially when asking for basic procedural safeguards. One young person described asking officers to turn on body-worn video and provide identification:

“I was asking for badge numbers... I was telling them to turn the camera on. They don’t like that. They were being stressful the whole time” (IV BJM2).

Another reflected that asserting rights appeared to provoke resistance rather than reassurance:

“He said, ‘You don’t give out those orders.’ I said, ‘I know my rights.’ That’s when it got worse” (IV BJM3).

The consequences of speaking strongly shaped future expectations. Even when persistence eventually led to some procedural compliance, such as body-worn video being switched on, young people described the effort required as costly and the outcome unchanged. When racist language or behaviour went unchallenged by other officers, young people drew broad conclusions about the efficacy of speaking up:

“They call me names... and no one says anything. So what’s the point of talking?” (IV BJM1).

Several young people explicitly compared their treatment with that of White peers, observing lighter tone, humour and explanation in similar situations:

“I’ve seen White kids get stopped and searched... laughing and joking. Where’s that with me?” (IV BJM2).

For Black and Mixed Heritage young people, then, voice was constrained at every stage of the four-dimensional model. Racialised treatment limited opportunities to speak, unsafe or physical conditions curtailed expression, listening was inconsistent or dismissive and the perceived consequences of speaking reinforced expectations that voice would not meaningfully shape outcomes.

6.5 Voice: the experiences of children and young people who are neurodivergent or have special educational needs and disabilities

Neurodivergent young people and those with SEND experienced the same four dimensions of voice but faced additional barriers related to processing pace, sensory overwhelm, misinterpreted communication and the need for predictable, supported interaction. Their accounts show that opportunities were lost when interactions moved too fast, conditions could become overwhelming within seconds, listening was disrupted by misinterpretations of communication differences and consequences led to long-term disengagement when their needs were misunderstood or dismissed.

In addition to the interactional barriers described above, neurodivergent young people and those with SEND often described *foundational disadvantages* that were shaped by earlier experiences of misinterpretation or disbelief. Previous encounters in which explicitly communicated needs were ignored or misunderstood taught some young people that disclosure was unlikely to lead to support, shaping expectations before subsequent police contact even began.

“Even if you tell them, ‘I’m autistic’... it feels like they’re going to either use it as ammo against you or not understand what you’ve said” (FG MX3).

Processing pace was a defining factor: rapid questioning, sudden shifts in tone or misread pauses meant young people could not access the opportunity to speak, even when they wanted to. Overwhelm often led to shutdowns or automatic compliance, illustrating that silence reflected cognitive overload rather than refusal. The conditions were particularly influential: noise, proximity, bright lights or multiple officers created sensory overload, making speech physically difficult. In custody, lack of comfort, hydration or reassurance amplified this barrier.

The quality of listening was similarly affected by misinterpretation. Communication differences, such as stimming,¹⁵ delayed responses or flat affect, were often read as defiance or dishonesty. Some young people hid their diagnoses to avoid ridicule or escalation. Officers also sometimes ignored the adults best placed to scaffold communication. Tools such as sunflower lanyards¹⁶ helped some people but left others feeling exposed when misunderstood. Intersections with race introduced further complexity, with neurodivergent behaviours in racially minoritised young people more likely to be interpreted as threats or aggression.

¹⁵ Stimming (short for *self-stimulating behaviour*) refers to repetitive movements or sounds that help a person regulate sensory inputs or emotions. Common examples include hand-flapping, rocking, tapping, fidgeting or repeating words or sounds. It is especially associated with autistic and other neurodivergent people, for whom stimming can be calming or grounding, a way to manage overwhelm.

¹⁶ Sunflower lanyards are part of the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower scheme, a UK-originated initiative that allows people with non-visible (hidden) disabilities to discreetly signal that they may need extra time, patience, understanding or support in public settings (such as transport, shops, healthcare or other services).

For neurodivergent young people and those with SEND, voice was shaped by how well officers created manageable conditions, recognised communication needs and avoided misinterpretation; failures across these areas limited opportunities and reduced safe, meaningful participation.

6.6 Concluding observations and insights

This chapter explored how children and young people experience voice in their encounters with police, including when they feel heard, able to speak and taken seriously. Across the accounts, children felt heard when officers created calm, predictable and private conditions; communicated clearly; moved at a manageable pace; and demonstrated genuine curiosity about their perspectives. Conversely, voice was constrained or shut down in rushed, public or coercive encounters, in which assumptions replaced listening or children felt overwhelmed or exposed. Most of the participants wanted to speak and share their perspectives, but only when they felt emotionally safe and believed that speaking would make a difference; opportunities to do so were described as inconsistent, with some withholding information due to fear, sensory overload or prior experiences of not being believed. Children expressed a preference for slower, one-tone conversations; simple explanations; choices about who is present; and time to think. They emphasised the importance of seeing their views reflected in decisions and outcomes. Experiences of voice were not equal: Black and minoritised young people described how they felt their credibility had been discounted, adultification and racialised assumptions making their voices harder to express and less likely to be believed, while neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND identified sensory overload, rapid pacing and misinterpretation of communication differences as key barriers unless officers made clear adaptations. The findings highlight voice as relational, contextual and fragile, shaped by power, identity and environment. The practical implications for policing, including actions to strengthen listening and responsiveness for Black and neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND, are set out in Chapters 7 and 8.

Cross-cutting chapter insights

- 1. Voice was inconsistent and fragile.** Children and young people rarely experienced voice as a predictable part of police encounters; opportunities to speak depended heavily on the officer, the context and the emotional climate of the moment.
- 2. Speaking did not guarantee being heard.** Children and young people distinguished sharply between *talking* and *being taken seriously*. Many felt their accounts were dismissed, overridden or treated as less credible because of age, identity or communication style.
- 3. Conditions shaped whether using voice was possible.** Privacy, pace, tone, physical stance and emotional safety all influenced whether young people felt able to express themselves. Coercive or high-stress encounters were the least conducive to voice.
- 4. Listening determined whether voice mattered.** For young people, a meaningful voice requires officers to show attunement, curiosity and validation. When listening was absent or perfunctory, their voice felt tokenistic or unsafe.
- 5. Influence was limited.** Even when young people spoke and felt heard, they rarely saw their input shape decisions or outcomes. This gap between expression and consequence reinforced a sense that using their voice often made little difference.

Chapter 7. What changes should be made to operational policing?

Children and young people's experiences and views

7.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses **RQ5: What specific changes should be made to operational policing practices to ensure policing is more child-centred, focusing on building children's trust and listening to their voices?** It draws on the full dataset to synthesise the children and young people's accounts of policing and translates them into a consolidated set of practice principles that aim to strengthen trust and voice and help further embed child-centred policing. It also highlights specific considerations for Black and Minority Ethnic children and young people and children and young people who are neurodivergent or have SEND.

Each of the eight principles is grounded in:

1. experiential data: what children and young people told us about their encounters across the policing journey and what this implies for practices
2. their specific asks, expectations and recommendations for how officers and forces should change practices.

The principles are derived solely and inductively from children and young people's accounts across the study's qualitative and survey data. They reflect what children and young people consistently told us they need and expect from police encounters, particularly regarding trust, voice, safety and fairness. Drawing on these accounts, Chapter 8 explores the application of these principles in different settings, and Chapter 9 (which draws on the policing consultations) examines the operational and systemic shifts required to implement them.

7.2 The principles

Chapters 5 and 6 showed that children and young people judge policing through interactional behaviours linked to trustworthiness and voice. Their recommendations consistently reflect respectful treatment, trustworthy motives, opportunities to participate and fair decision-making. The fact that these ideas emerged naturally through children and young people's descriptions of what "good policing" feels like suggests that procedural justice principles resonate intuitively with those who experience police power.

Making this connection explicit is both analytically and practically useful. Procedural justice is increasingly recognised within policing policy and professional training, and framing children and young people's expectations within this established body of work helps demonstrate that these expectations are not niche or child-specific. Instead, they reflect widely accepted foundations of legitimate policing.

At the same time, what children and young people ask for is, in many respects, simply good police work. Listening, giving clear explanations, communicating in accessible ways, showing care and acting consistently are central to effective interactions with adults and children. The principles that follow, therefore, articulate universal elements of good practice while also translating them into concrete behaviours that are particularly important in childhood encounters. The chapter ends by highlighting what senior leaders need to consider to ensure child-centred policing is routine, consistent and supported across forces.

A summary of the eight principles is outlined in Figure 7.1, with the core themes and associated practical enactments for each outlined in the subsequent sections. Although interconnected, each principle addresses a distinct element of children and young people's experiences.

Figure 7.1: The eight child-centred principles derived from an analysis of children and young people's experiences



Principle 1: Child- and youth-centred communication

“Be relatable and respectful without power-tripping; balance authority with humanity to avoid fear” (FG BW1).

Children and young people emphasised that how officers communicate often matters as much as what they do. The actions below focus on the core communication practices that consistently mattered most to the children and young people who took part in this study, applicable across a range of settings.

Table 7.1: Principle 1 practice themes and actions¹⁷

Practice theme	Specific actions police can take
1. Communicate calmly, respectfully and in developmentally appropriate ways.	• Open interactions with a calm greeting and brief introduction. • Keep your voice level and movements measured; avoid abrupt changes in tone or pace. • Don't speak down to the child or treat them as an adult.
2. Use clear, plain language and check understanding.	• Explain what you are doing and why, using everyday language. • Break explanations down into small steps rather than sharing long blocks of information. • Avoid asking "Do you understand?"; instead, ask the child to explain back what will happen next in their own words.
3. Adapt communication so it is accessible for all children, including neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND.	• Ask what helps the child communicate best (for example, going slower, writing things down, taking breaks) and take this on board. • Allow extra processing time; do not repeat questions rapidly if the child is silent or overwhelmed. • Keep your tone, positioning and movements predictable, and signal changes before they happen.
4. Be transparent, honest and consistent, including in digital contact.	• Be clear about what you know, what you do not know yet and what will happen next. • Avoid over-promising outcomes or timeframes. • In digital or online contact, clearly state who you are, your role and the purpose of the contact, and explain how information shared will be used.

Note: SEND = special educational needs and disabilities

Principle 2: Making sense in the moment: clarity, explanation and immediate predictability

"Talk young people through each step so there are no surprises; explain better during stops" (FG MX2).

Children and young people consistently described uncertainty during police encounters as frightening and destabilising. They felt safer, calmer and more trusting when officers clearly explained what was happening, why and what would happen next. This enabled them to make sense of actions as they occurred rather than being left to infer meaning or imagine worst-case scenarios. This principle focuses on ensuring that police interactions are clear, explained and immediately predictable.

¹⁷ **Supporting evidence for Principle 1:** These communication practices are supported by evidence on child interviewing (Agnew et al., 2006; Aldridge-Waddon, 2019; Davidson & Bifulco, 2009; Forde & Kilkelly, 2023; Quinn & Jackson, 2007), trauma-informed and emotionally attuned policing (McElvaney et al., 2024; Millar et al., 2019; Millar et al., 2022), how young people experience police responses to harm (Beckett et al., 2015; Allnock et al., 2021), procedural justice with youth (Deuchar et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2020) and communication and comprehension needs for neurodivergent and cognitively disabled children (Ellem & Richards, 2018; Hepworth, 2017).

Table 7.2: Principle 2 practice themes and actions¹⁸

Practice theme	Specific actions police can take
1. Explain what is happening, why and what will happen next.	• State the lawful reason for the interaction in clear, child-friendly language. • Explain each step before it happens (e.g. “The next thing I’m going to do is…”). • Clarify what the interaction means for the child (e.g. whether they are suspected of wrongdoing or not) to prevent misunderstanding.
2. Explain why the actions and questions are happening.	• Explain the purpose of your actions and questions in simple terms (e.g. “I’m asking this so we can understand what happened and keep you safe”). • Provide context before sensitive or intrusive questions so they are not experienced as sudden or arbitrary. • Check understanding where needed – ask the child to explain back in their own words (“Can you tell me what’s going to happen next?”).
3. Set immediate expectations.	• Tell the child what will happen next and in what order (e.g. “First we’ll talk, then you’ll have a break”). • Give simple indications of timing (e.g. how long something will take or how many steps remain). • Signpost transitions between activities (e.g. “Now we’re moving to the next part”).
4. Clarify roles and people.	• Introduce everyone present and explain their roles clearly. • Explain the presence of unseen others (e.g. observers, cameras) and why they are here. • Clarify who is responsible for what so the child understands who they can ask for help or information.
5. Prepare for and explain potentially distressing actions.	• Explain clearly and concretely what will happen before any unfamiliar or intrusive procedure. • Use simple, sensory language where relevant (e.g. what something might feel like, how long it will take). • Reassure about safety, privacy and choice where appropriate (e.g. breaks, presence of others)

¹⁸ **Supporting evidence for Principle 2:** These practices are supported by evidence on transparent and grounds-based policing in youth stop and searches (Burke et al., 2023; Deuchar et al., 2019); step-by-step and predictable processes in child interviewing and rights communication (Agnew et al., 2006; Aldridge-Waddon, 2019; Forde & Kilkelly, 2023); trauma-informed practices emphasising clear explanations, honest timeframes and reduced uncertainty (Bejinariu et al., 2020; McElvaney et al., 2024; Millar et al., 2018; Millar et al., 2021); and the need for structured pacing, advance warnings and low-arousal environments for neurodivergent or cognitively disabled children (Ellem & Richards, 2018; Hepworth, 2017).

Principle 3: Relational visibility and everyday familiarity

“Where I used to live, there was a patrol car that just patrolled one area. Everybody knew them, and they knew us... We’d tell them about incidents” (FG ND1).

Children and young people described feeling safer and more confident engaging with police when officers were familiar, predictable and visible outside moments of crisis. By contrast, police who appeared only in enforcement or emergency contexts felt unpredictable and intimidating.

Table 7.3: Principle 3 practice themes and actions¹⁹

Practice theme	Specific actions police can take
1. Use everyday, non-enforcement contact to build recognition and trust.	• Use routine patrol time to engage briefly and informally with children (e.g. greetings, short conversations). • When deployment allows, prioritise walking patrols and low-key visibility over vehicle-based contact. Avoid approaching groups of children in ways that signal suspicion or enforcement unless necessary.
2. Build familiarity through continuity of people.	• Where possible, maintain continuity of officers in neighbourhoods, schools and youth settings. • When handovers are unavoidable, introduce successors clearly and explain role changes. • Use named points of contact for schools, care settings and youth services wherever feasible.
3. Make police presence in schools and youth settings relational, not crisis-led.	• Prioritise small-group or informal engagement over large assemblies where possible. • Use school and youth-setting contact to signal approachability and availability, not just authority. • Ensure children know how and when they can safely approach or contact police outside emergencies.
4. Ensure visibility counters, rather than reinforces, inequality and suspicion.	• Reflect on whether similar behaviours by different groups of children prompt different levels of attention. • Use supervision and peer discussion to identify patterns of disproportionate or racialised visibility. • Actively demonstrate neutrality and fairness during everyday engagement.
5. Make everyday contact predictable and non-intimidating.	• Avoid sudden approaches, crowding or unnecessary escalation cues during routine engagement. • Approach from the front when possible and announce presence calmly. • Keep movements, tone and positioning steady during informal contact.

¹⁹ **Supporting evidence for Principle 3:** These practices are supported by evidence on relationship-building approaches that use regular, non-enforcement contact between police and young people to reduce fear, challenge stereotypes and promote mutual understanding (Broaddus et al., 2013; Burke et al., 2023; Payne et al., 2020); research on procedural justice that highlights the value of respectful, everyday interactions for legitimacy among youth (Deuchar et al., 2019; O’Neill & Aston, 2018); and studies showing that calm, human and community-embedded police presence helps counter mistrust, especially among racially minoritised young people (Bejinariu et al., 2020; Ellem & Richards, 2018; Millar et al., 2021).

Principle 4: Fairness, dignity, and anti-bias practices

“Avoid assuming guilt based on clothes, area or past history (e.g. all black clothing ≠ knife)” (IV BJM3).

Children and young people’s accounts powerfully depicted how assumptions about age, race, appearance, behaviour or background shaped how police encounters unfolded. This principle therefore focuses on how children are perceived, assessed and responded to by officers rather than on the communication or procedural dimensions of encounters.

Table 7.4: Principle 4 practice themes and actions²⁰

Practice theme	Specific actions police can take
1. Treat every child as a child, regardless of appearance, behaviour or history.	• Begin from the assumption that the person is a child and respond accordingly. • Avoid language, tone or tactics that frame the child as an adult or as inherently threatening. • Regularly check whether your response reflects the child’s age and developmental stage.
2. Actively challenge assumptions and stereotyping in decision-making.	• Be explicit with yourself and colleagues about the legitimate reason for engagement. • Ask whether the same behaviour would prompt the same response if the child were from a different background. • Avoid relying on prior intelligence, reputation or family context as shorthand for risk.
3. Safeguard dignity and minimise unnecessary harm or exposure.	• Avoid the unnecessary use of force, restraint or controlling tactics. • Ensure indicators of distress are not misinterpreted as threatening behaviours. • Restore dignity after tense moments by acknowledging the distress or disruption caused.
4. Use supervision, accountability and reflection to prevent discriminatory practice.	• Use supervision, peer discussion and body-worn video review to reflect on judgement and proportionality. • Pay attention to patterns in discretionary decision-making involving Black children, neurodivergent children and those with SEND. • Treat fairness and anti-bias practice as core professional standards, not optional skills.

Note: SEND = special educational needs and disabilities

²⁰ **Supporting evidence for Principle 4:** These practices are supported by research documenting how children experience stereotyping, adultification and unequal treatment in police encounters, particularly among racially minoritised and exploited youth (Bejinariu et al., 2020; Deuchar et al., 2019; Millar et al., 2021); the importance of respectful, patient communication that recognises children’s developmental needs (Ellem & Richards, 2018; Forde & Kilkelly, 2023; Quinn & Jackson, 2007); and studies showing that cultural sensitivity, non-judgemental engagement and recognition of children’s distress promote fairness and trustworthiness in police–child/young person interactions (Burke et al., 2023; McElvaney et al., 2024; Payne et al., 2020).

Principle 5: Supporting voice and participation

“You know you’ve been heard when something happens afterwards” (FG ND2).

Children and young people were clear that voice is not simply about being allowed to speak but about having the right conditions for speaking and understanding what difference their voices make. This principle focuses on creating the conditions in which children’s voices can be expressed, taken seriously and have a meaningful impact.

Table 7.5: Principle 5 practice themes and actions²¹

Practice theme	Specific actions police can take
1. Create safe and supportive conditions for children and young people to speak.	• Give the child time to speak without interruption or urgency. • Make clear that the child is not in trouble for speaking and that it is safe to share their perspective.
2. Listen attentively and treat children and young people’s accounts as credible.	• Address the child directly and give them time to finish what they are saying. • Use follow-up questions to show you are engaging with their account rather than questioning its validity. • Avoid assumptions based on age, identity, behaviour or previous contact.
3. Support different ways of communicating, especially for neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND.	• Accept non-verbal cues, behaviour or support from trusted adults as forms of communication where speech is difficult. • Avoid misinterpreting distress, delay or flat affect as defiance or lack of cooperation.
4. Show how children and young people’s views have influenced what happens next.	• Explain clearly how what the child has said is being taken into account, even if it cannot change the outcome fully. • When decisions go against the child’s wishes, explain why in accessible terms. • Follow up where possible to reinforce that the child’s voice mattered (e.g. updates, revisiting concerns).

Note: SEND = special educational needs and disabilities

²¹ **Supporting evidence for Principle 5:** These practices are supported by research showing that children’s participation and sense of voice are essential for fairness, safety and trust in police encounters. Evidence from child interviewing highlights the value of open prompts, narrative space, comprehension checks and opportunities for children to shape the interaction (Agnew et al., 2006; Aldridge-Waddon, 2019; Forde & Kilkelly, 2023). Studies with victims of child sexual abuse (CSA), child sexual exploitation (CSE) and domestic violence and abuse (DVA) emphasise the need for safe spaces, validation, involvement in decisions and support from trusted adults (Beckett & Warrington, 2015; Bejinariu et al., 2020; McElvaney et al., 2024; Millar et al., 2018; Millar et al., 2021). Procedural justice research with young people shows that being listened to, having input into decisions and receiving follow-up explanations underpin perceptions of respect and trustworthiness (Deuchar et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2020). Adaptations for neurodivergent and cognitively disabled children underline the importance of predictable communication, extended processing time and alternative modes of expression (Ellem & Richards, 2018; Hepworth, 2017).

Principle 6: Welfare-first and proportionate responses

“If someone is cooperating, avoid unnecessary escalation” (IV BJM2).

Children and young people consistently emphasised that police responses should begin from care, safety and understanding rather than control or enforcement. This principle focuses on how officers assess risk and choose responses, rather than on communication or explanation alone.

Table 7.6: Principle 6 practice themes and actions²²

Practice theme	Specific actions police can take
1. Start from welfare and curiosity before enforcement.	• Open encounters with a welfare check (e.g. “Are you okay?”) where safe to do so. • Distinguish clearly between distress, vulnerability and intentional wrongdoing. • Avoid framing responses solely through risk or control where welfare concerns are present.
2. Use the least intrusive response necessary.	• Match the level of intervention to the actual behaviour and risk presented. • Avoid unnecessary handcuffing, restraint or containment when children are calm, compliant or distressed rather than threatening. • Reassess proportionality throughout the encounter, not just at the outset. • Where force is used or a child shows signs of distress, officers must actively monitor breathing, consciousness and physical wellbeing and respond immediately to any medical concerns.
3. Prioritise de-escalation and emotional regulation.	• Slow the pace of encounters where possible. • Reduce stimulation (voices, movement, physical proximity) to support regulation. • Use space, time and calm presence as de-escalatory tools before physical control.
4. Guard against unnecessary criminalisation of vulnerability.	• Consider alternatives to arrest or formal action when behaviour is driven by distress, trauma or unmet needs. • Work with safeguarding and support services to prioritise care-led responses.

²² **Supporting evidence for Principle 6:** These practices reflect extensive evidence that children experience police escalation as frightening, unfair and sometimes harmful and that welfare-first, proportionate responses improve safety and trust. Research on DVA-, CSA- and CSE-impacted children and children with adverse childhood experiences emphasises the need to start with welfare enquiries, take distress seriously and avoid criminalising children who need protection (Bejinariu et al., 2020; McElvaney et al., 2024; Millar et al., 2018; Millar et al., 2021). Studies of police questioning and youth stops show that rapid escalation, intimidating tactics and premature enforcement undermine legitimacy and silence children’s voices (Cleary, 2014; Deuchar et al., 2019; Forde & Kilkelly, 2023). Evidence relating to neurodivergent and cognitively disabled children shows that misinterpreting overwhelm or atypical communication as defiance increases the risk of disproportionate responses, highlighting the need for slow pacing, predictable actions and adapted approaches (Ellem & Richards, 2018; Hepworth, 2017).

Principle 7: Safe, child-appropriate environments and processes

“Design custody environments for children... more comfortable than adult cells” (IV WJM2).

Children and young people described the physical and procedural environments of policing, particularly custody, transport and interview spaces, as shaping their fear, ability to communicate and sense of safety. This principle focuses on the settings and conditions in which police work happens, rather than on individual interaction styles.

Table 7.7: Principle 7 practice themes and actions²³

Practice theme	Specific actions the police can take
1. Reduce sensory and environmental stress wherever possible.	• Limit the number of officers speaking or present during interactions with children. • Reduce unnecessary noise, radio traffic and sudden movements where safe to do so. • Offer quieter, calmer spaces for conversations, interviews or waiting where available.
2. Minimise public exposure and unnecessary intimidation.	• Avoid discussing sensitive issues in public view where possible. • Minimise visible tactics (e.g. lights, surroundings, display of force) unless required for safety. • Explain clearly when discretion or privacy is not possible.
3. Use predictable sequencing and reduced uncertainty in the physical handling of children.	• Explain before moving closer, touching or changing the child’s location, wherever safety allows. • Move at a pace that allows children time to process what is happening.
4. Design environments to work for neurodivergent children and those with SEND.	• Approach all environments as needing to be sensory-aware by default. • Offer simple adjustments (breaks, reduced noise, predictable sequencing) proactively. • Do not rely on disclosure or diagnosis to justify adaptations.

Note: SEND = special educational needs and disabilities

²³ **Supporting evidence for Principle 7:** These practices are supported by research showing that children experience public or high-visibility police actions as frightening, embarrassing and harmful to their sense of safety and prefer calm, private and predictable environments during police encounters (Deuchar et al., 2019; Millar et al., 2021). Evidence on child victims of DVA, CSA and CSE highlights the need for safe, quiet and non-intimidating spaces that reduce sensory overload and enable children to speak freely (Bejinariu et al., 2020; McElvaney et al., 2024). Interviewing and rights-based studies emphasise the importance of child-appropriate rooms, reduced distractions and clear, gentle environmental transitions (Aldridge-Waddon, 2019; Forde & Kilkelly, 2023). Research on neurodivergent and cognitively disabled children further shows that sudden environmental changes, loud noises, bright lights and unexpected movements can escalate distress, underscoring the need for calm, predictable physical settings (Ellem & Richards, 2018; Hepworth, 2017).

Principle 8: Reliable, accountable and follow-through practices

“If you say you will do something..., do it” (FG MX6).

Children and young people indicated that trust depended on whether police followed through on what they said they would do. This principle, therefore, focuses on what happens after and beyond individual encounters, recognising that reliability and accountability are essential to child-centred policing.

Table 7.8: Principle 8 practice themes and actions²⁴

Practice theme	Specific actions the police can take
1. Do what you say you will do.	• Be clear about what is likely to happen next and what may happen over time. • Set realistic expectations, including possible delays or uncertainty. • Avoid overpromising; be honest about what you can and cannot do. • Track commitments and ensure they are followed through. • Ensure continuity so children do not have to repeat information or re-interpret what is happening.
2. Keep children informed, even when there is no progress.	• Provide a simple overview of the process so children understand what stage they are at. • Provide updates as things progress, even when nothing has changed. • Explain delays, waiting periods and next points of contact. • Agree how updates will happen (e.g. text message, phone call, home visit). • Set a clear next update point (e.g. “I will update you on Tuesday, even if there is no change), and record this so it is not missed. • Even when there are no updates, let the child or young person know this via the agreed contact methods. • If you are unable to give an update as planned, acknowledge it quickly and reset the expectation.
3. Ensure accountability, transparency and routes for redress.	• All officers share responsibility for the safety of children and young people. This includes actively challenging or intervening when a colleague’s actions risk harm, escalate a situation unnecessarily or fail to reflect child-centred practices. • Provide stop-and-search records on the spot. • Use standardised forms and double-check accuracy. • Provide the child with a copy of the record where appropriate, and signpost them to the Youth Justice Charter to support their understanding of their rights and what they can expect from the process.

²⁴ **Supporting evidence for Principle 8:** These practices are supported by research showing that children’s trust in police depends heavily on follow-through, consistent updates and visible accountability. Evidence across DVA, CSA and CSE contexts highlights that unmet promises, unclear timelines and disappearing officers undermine feelings of safety and fairness, while timely updates and transparent explanations strengthen trust (Bejinariu et al., 2020; McElvaney et al., 2024; Millar et al., 2018; Millar et al., 2021). Procedural justice studies emphasise that legitimacy is built when children see that their input leads to action and when officers explain decisions clearly (Deuchar et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2020). Stop-and-search reform evidence demonstrates the value of documentation, clear records, follow-up information and accessible feedback routes (O’Neill & Aston, 2018). These findings underscore the need for reliable processes, accurate recording, smooth handovers and honest, child-friendly communication about what has happened and what will happen next.

4. Where harm has occurred, support repair and learning.	• Acknowledge harm clearly and directly, including where police actions may have caused fear, distress or confusion. • Offer an apology where appropriate, explaining what should have happened and what will be done differently. • Explain what steps will be taken to review the incident or address the concerns raised by the child or family. • Ensure the child knows how to raise concerns, ask questions later or access support if they are unsettled by the encounter.
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7.3 Concluding observations and insights

This chapter brought together children and young people's accounts of policing to present eight evidence-based principles designed to make policing more child-centred. While most of the changes described can be enacted immediately by individual officers, such as by using simpler communication styles, slowing the pace, providing clearer explanations or avoiding interruptions, some improvements depend on organisational structures, resources and leadership. Across the eight principles, several themes highlight areas where strategic oversight will be required to reliably and sustainably embed child-centred practices. These include:

- **Ensuring continuity of personnel** so that everyday visibility is familiar and relational rather than having personnel appear only in crisis situations; this depends on neighbourhood staffing models and limits how often officers are redeployed elsewhere to cover shortages.
- **Embedding anti-bias and anti-adultification practices**, particularly for Black children and young people who described rapid suspicion and misinterpretation; achieving this includes, but importantly goes beyond, training and monitoring. It requires broader institutional commitments, including leadership accountability, changes to organisational culture, supervision practices and alignment with national strategies such as the Police Race Action Plan (The College of Policing and the NPCC, 2022).
- **Creating accessible neurodivergent- and SEND-aware systems**, such as alternative communication formats, quiet spaces, predictable routines and protocols for avoiding leading questions or misreading shutdowns, all of which need to be formalised beyond individual discretion.
- **Improving organisational follow-through**, including trackable feedback routes, standardised handovers, public updates after visible operations and clear information sharing explanations, all dependent on force-level processes and digital infrastructure.
- **Adapting environments**, ensuring interview rooms, reception areas and home attendance practices are safe, calm and non-intimidating for children. This requires establishing shared environmental standards across sites and units.

These areas illustrate where leadership, investment and cross-agency coordination are essential to make the frontline practice described both possible and consistent (and are explored in more detail in Chapter 8). While such systemic requirements entail considerable organisational effort, it is a foundational requirement for a policing system that is responsive, accountable and child-centred.

Chapter 8. Applying child- and youth-centred policing principles across different settings

8.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how the child- and youth-centred policing principles set out in Chapter 7 are applied across different settings. Drawing on the children and young people's accounts of encounters in public spaces, homes, schools, custody and other environments, it explores how consistent core expectations, such as clarity, fairness and emotional safety, are translated into practice in context.

In doing so, the chapter addresses **RQ4** by examining how the nature of police encounters varies across settings and what this means in practice. It also contributes to **RQ5**, which examines what specific changes are needed in operational policing practices to ensure that policing is more child-centred, particularly in ways that build children's trust and support their voices and in how these changes can be embedded across officers, teams and forces.

The chapter provides a settings-specific application of each principle, highlighting where and why certain principles become especially salient and outlining the practical adjustments that children and young people identify as making the greatest difference in each context. It is structured to show how these adjustments operate in practice across different policing environments. In this way, it demonstrates how universal principles can be meaningfully adapted to the realities, risks, sensory demands and emotional dynamics of different policing environments, supporting the consistent delivery of child-centred practices across all encounters.

8.2 Applying the principles in high-intensity settings: custody and police stations

Custody concentrates power, removes autonomy and extends periods of time under police control, making children and young people acutely dependent on police systems as well as individual officers. In this context, delays, inaction or procedural decisions carry heightened weight and are often experienced as abandonment or punishment rather than as isolated or minor failures.



In this setting, children and young people emphasised:

- **basic care as safeguarding**, including access to food, water, warmth, functioning buzzers, stimulation such as child- and young-person-friendly books and regular welfare checks
- **transparent use of surveillance**, particularly clear explanations of what in-cell CCTV can and cannot see, to reduce fear and humiliation
- **continuity across shifts**, as broken promises and lost information were especially distressing when children were confined and waiting
- **sensory containment**, with reduced noise, movement and stimulation, which children (especially those who are neurodivergent) described as central to remaining regulated.

8.3 Applying the principles in streets and public spaces

Street encounters are brief, discretionary and highly visible and are the setting where children most quickly form judgements about fairness and legitimacy. In these public encounters, the behaviours that help children feel safe, respected and listened to are harder to sustain and more easily disrupted. These priorities reflect children's emphasis on fairness and dignity, welfare-first proportionality and accountability in discretionary encounters, as articulated in the cross-cutting principles.



In this setting, children and young people emphasised:

- **avoiding public escalation**, including surrounding, crowding or spotlighting, which children experienced as shaming even when no force was used
- **actively countering adultification and racialised suspicion**, as street policing was where Black children and young people most strongly described being assumed to be older, guiltier or more threatening than peers
- **managing pace and thresholds**, with rapid escalation, even where children were compliant, repeatedly identified as unnecessary and frightening
- **demonstrating accountability**, particularly through clear grounds, the use of body-worn video and records and follow-through, to avoid repeated encounters feeling arbitrary or targeted.

8.4 Applying the principles in home and private spaces

Police presence in the home was experienced as uniquely intrusive, collapsing boundaries between safety, surveillance and family crisis. Children described this setting as one where tone and sequencing mattered more than enforcement outcomes. These priorities reflect children's emphasis on dignity,

emotional safety, welfare-first responses and the respectful use of authority, as articulated in the cross-cutting principles.



In this setting, children and young people emphasised:

- **gentle entry and explanation**, particularly when officers arrived in numbers or at night, to prevent immediate fear and confusion
- **being seen, spoken to and engaged with directly as children or young people**, rather than spoken about around adults, especially during safeguarding or domestic abuse call-outs
- **clear safety-first sequencing**, with reassurance and welfare taking priority over procedural task-completion
- **careful management of private space**, including bedrooms and personal belongings, to preserve dignity.

8.5 Applying the principles in schools and education settings

Children did not describe schools as primary sites of policing, but when police were involved, the issue was not the presence but the proportionality. Children were clear that police involvement should be purposeful, limited and clearly bounded. These priorities reflect children's emphasis on proportionality, clear boundaries of police involvement, meaningful voice and accountability, as articulated in the cross-cutting principles.



In this setting, children prioritised:

- **harm being taken seriously**, particularly when schools were experienced as minimising violence, bullying or sexual harm between pupils
- **accessible routes to speak directly to police** when school-based responses failed or felt unsafe
- **relational, non-crisis engagement** rather than routine or enforcement-led presence.

8.6 Applying the principles in transport settings

Transport environments were described as confusing, highly public and authority-dense, with children often unclear who had power within these settings. These settings amplified fear, compliance and misinterpretation. These priorities reflect children's emphasis on clarity, proportionality, dignity and accountability in highly public and authority-heavy environments, as articulated in the cross-cutting principles.



In this setting, children highlighted:

- **clarity of role and authority**, particularly distinguishing between BTP, transport staff and local police
- **careful use of threat language**, as references to arrests or sanctions that were not followed through increased fear and mistrust
- **managing enclosure and crowding**, as confined spaces intensified anxiety and sensory overwhelm
- **reassurance during unrelated incidents**, especially when visible policing activity (e.g. armed officers) was not directed at them.

8.7 Concluding observations and insights

Children and young people's core expectations of policing, as outlined in the eight principles, remain consistent across settings. What differs is how vulnerable these expectations become in different environments.

Children and young people's accounts show that custody, streets, homes, schools and transport settings each place distinct pressures on child-centred practices, shaping how police behaviour is experienced. Factors such as visibility, pace, enclosure, dependency on systems and blurred institutional boundaries can either support or undermine trust and voice, even when officers intend to act fairly.

These pressures do not operate evenly. Black children and young people and those who are neurodivergent or have SEND described how setting-specific dynamics intensified experiences of adultification, misinterpretation or sensory overload.

Overall, the findings highlight that child-centred policing depends not only on consistent principles but on recognising where those principles are most at risk. This insight provides a bridge to the next chapter, which considers the organisational and systemic conditions required to deliver child-centred practices reliably across different policing environments.

Chapter 9. What operational and organisational changes are needed to embed child-centred policing?

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents insights from consultations with policing professionals, undertaken as the final, translational phase of the study. These consultations took place after the analysis of the children and young people's accounts was completed and after the eight child-centred policing principles had been fully developed.

It is important to be clear about the sequencing and purpose of this phase. The eight child-centred policing principles set out in Chapter 7 were derived solely and inductively from the children and young people's accounts across the study's qualitative and survey data. They reflect what children and young people consistently told us they need and expect from police encounters, particularly regarding trust, voice, safety and fairness. The principles were neither generated by nor amended through the police consultations.

The function of the police consultations was different. Rather than shaping the content of the principles, this stage focused on feasibility, enactment and implementation. The policing professionals were invited to engage with the already-established principles and the children's illustrative accounts and to reflect on:

- what forms of practice already align with these expectations
- what routinely gets in the way of delivering them
- what operational, organisational and system-level conditions are required to make child-centred policing reliable rather than dependent on individual officers.

In this sense, the consultations sit between evidence and application. The actions and examples that appear alongside the principles elsewhere in the report should therefore be understood as professionally informed enactments of children and young people's priorities rather than as revisions to them.

The consultations directly address the second part of RQ5: how child-centred policing can be embedded consistently across officers, teams and forces. Insights from frontline officers and those in strategic or system-influencing roles illuminate where children's expectations align strongly with policing experiences; why issues such as communication, predictability, welfare-first proportionality and calm environments matter operationally; and where existing systems and structures make them difficult to deliver consistently.

The chapter begins by outlining areas of strong convergence between the children's accounts and police perspectives. It then examines the operational pressures that constrain child-centred practice before considering the leadership, organisational and system-level conditions required to support it.

Throughout, findings are considered through cross-cutting lenses relating to neurodivergence and SEND, race and ethnicity and place. The chapter concludes by drawing together the implications for translating child-centred principles into sustainable policing practices.

9.2 Synergies in police accounts

The policing professionals strongly affirmed the core elements that children and young people identified as essential to feeling safe, respected and able to engage during police encounters. Although the officers approached these issues from operational perspectives, their reflections closely mirrored the priorities articulated by the children throughout the study. This convergence demonstrates that the principles of child-centred policing not only align with children and young people's lived experiences but also resonate with the practical realities of frontline and strategic policing.

First, the police validated that communication is a safeguarding act. The officers repeatedly acknowledged that the tone they use, the pace they apply, who leads the interaction and how they address children and young people shape whether a child feels overwhelmed, ignored or able to participate. They recognised that communication is a mechanism through which safety, understanding and de-escalation are established.

“Too many voices... calm, clear instruction is a much better way to go... You may just be triggering the very thing that you're trying to avoid” (Inspector, Youth Justice).

Second, the officers strongly endorsed the importance of predictability and consistency between what is said and done. Like the children and young people, the police participants emphasised that explaining next steps and changes and following through on commitments reduce uncertainty and prevent escalation. They recognised that predictability is central to building trust; children and young people need officers to make each step clear, to signal upcoming actions before they occur and to keep explanations steady and consistent. This is particularly important for children with previous difficult encounters or a limited understanding of policing processes. A PCSO in the operational group shared:

“I do think that there could be... more consistency about like a single point of contact or an officer that picks for those more at-risk young people... I think that would really support young people in understanding and consistency.”

In describing how inconsistent explanations given at different stages of an investigation can undermine trust, a strategic officer explained how information conveyed to children can change as cases progress and officers become aware of additional legal or procedural details:

“They give a slightly different message because they know more about the intricacies... so that consistency can be really tricky, and it does come back to bite us.”

Third, the police stakeholders affirmed the value of welfare-first proportionality. The officers noted that decisions grounded in a clear safeguarding rationale before enforcement is considered are more effective and fair and reduce unnecessary criminalisation. This aligns closely with the children's

accounts of wanting policing that distinguishes vulnerability from wrongdoing. An Inspector acknowledged the risk of criminalising children when they are actually victims or distressed:

“Police often react to loud/emotional children with command/control, risking [the] arrest of victims/witnesses... We need to tolerate heightened emotions, de-escalate [and] regulate before enforcement.”

Fourth, the police recognised the need for child-appropriate environments – spaces intentionally designed to reduce sensory load and support feelings of safety for *all* children and young people. The officers described how many routine policing environments contain features that can quickly overwhelm children, noting that *“sudden movements, multiple officers speaking, room changes, noises or equipment can trigger sensory shocks”*. They recognised that calmer, quieter and less visually cluttered settings help children remain grounded and engaged, particularly during stressful encounters. Across the discussions, the officers emphasised that limiting noise, movement, bright lighting and the number of people present is not merely a comfort measure but a core safeguarding requirement.

The requirement for child-appropriate environments took on heightened importance when the officers reflected on the needs of neurodivergent children. The policing stakeholders stressed that sensory environments are central to whether autistic or otherwise neurodivergent young people can participate, regulate and feel safe. Some described concrete adaptations already in use, such as one force’s child-centred custody suites, which included *“two dedicated cells per site that have been painted... dedicated interview rooms... and resources for things like fidget toys, ear defenders, [and] eye masks”*, simple, inexpensive changes that they described as producing *“absolutely fantastic”* results in reducing distress and escalation. The officers also emphasised that children themselves had been clear about what helps: asking for *“no surprises”* and explaining actions in advance because *“multiple officers speaking... [and] noises can trigger sensory shocks”*.

Finally, the police stakeholders reaffirmed the importance of equity, particularly regarding race, adultification and structural fairness. In the strategic discussion, the officers openly confronted how organisational assumptions can obscure the realities faced by Black children, noting that *“...there’s a huge dissonance between Black children’s experiences and what police think is happening... why are these experiences shocking to us?”* This reflection emerged alongside concerns about racialised interpretations of behaviour, the inconsistent use of body-worn video and the routine adultification of Black boys, all of which can erode trust before an encounter even begins. The officers stressed that equity cannot be left to individual discretion or interpersonal skill; rather, it requires structural awareness, organisational responsibility and consistent systemic safeguards to prevent these harms from recurring.

These areas of alignment demonstrate a striking convergence between what the children say they need and what the police stakeholders believe is both right and achievable. This shared understanding provides the foundation for the remainder of the chapter, which turns to the practical question that the officers wrestled with most: what would it take to deliver these child-centred principles reliably in real-world policing environments?

9.3 What makes child-centred policing possible in practice?

The police stakeholders recognised that child-centred policing does not rely on specialist expertise or additional time but on a set of simple, repeatable actions that officers can use reliably, even under pressure. These practices closely mirror what the children and young people described as making encounters feel safe, respectful and comprehensible. The officers emphasised that these behaviours are *feasible* within existing roles when supported by clear systems and can be applied across varied contexts. A Police Constable noted:

“A lot of this comes down to [the] training of staff... making sure that the people dealing with young people on a day-to-day basis know how to do that. We don’t get that training... It’s something you either pick up yourself or you don’t. So training is absolutely key.”

An Inspector in the strategic group argued for simple changes that are practical across all contexts, that work universally and do not require special circumstances:

“If you build your communication toolkit as if everyone had a neurodiversity issue, you’re going to get much better communication... It’s just better for everybody.”

A clear lead-speaker model. The officers consistently highlighted the value of having a single lead speaker during an encounter, especially when several adults are present. This reduces cognitive load for children and prevents conflicting instructions. As one Inspector noted, reflecting on body-worn video reviews:

“What I see often is lots of adults in uniform... overspeaking each other... and I think really simple things like one voice. If that voice isn’t working, try another voice.”

Plain language and age-appropriate explanations. The police stakeholders stressed that children need information that is concrete, jargon-free and directly addressed to them. The officers described adjusting language to avoid either overwhelming young people or speaking in ways that feel patronising or dismissive.

Simple explanations that reduce surprises. The stakeholders described narrating each step of an encounter (“Now I’m going to... Next we’ll...”) as one of the most effective ways to reduce fear and prevent escalation. This short, structured explanation was seen as especially important for children who may not anticipate policing procedures or who have previously had destabilising encounters.

Checks for understanding. Rather than asking “Do you understand?”, the officers endorsed a quick “teach back” check: inviting the child to describe, in their own words, what will happen next. This was understood as a practical way to confirm comprehension, particularly for neurodivergent young people or those experiencing heightened anxiety.

Transparent, honest handovers. Given the realities of shift patterns and caseload transitions, the officers stressed the value of openly naming who will take over (“a specialist detective will contact you

next; my role is first response”). Clear handovers reduce confusion and prevent the frustration young people expressed when officers disappear without explanation.

Partial continuity. While the police stakeholders said that full continuity is rarely possible, the officers highlighted realistic alternatives, such as ensuring a named point of contact, performing predictable follow-ups (e.g. a short text or card), working closely with partners and setting consistent messages across teams. These small steps were seen as significantly reducing the need for children to repeat themselves and helping stabilise interactions. As described by a Detective Chief Inspector:

“We can’t give that. We just can’t. The turnover of staff is too great... It’s really difficult... But this is where partnerships come into place... They’ve got a part to play in explaining what people can expect from the police... managing those expectations.”

These small, repeatable actions were seen as realistic ways to lay the frontline foundations of child-centred policing; they are simple, teachable and achievable on shift, provided the wider system supports officers in using them.

9.4 What gets in the way (operational pressures)

The police stakeholders were clear that child-centred policing is both desirable and achievable but not reliably deliverable within the pressures of everyday policing. Three operational constraints were identified as especially prominent, each shaping the time, attention and emotional capacity officers have to enact the practices children say they need (see Table 9.1 for more detail).

Time, demand and abstractions reduce relational contact.

The officers described the relentless pace of response work as one of the most significant barriers to child-centred practice. High demand, rapid job turnover and frequent redeployments were felt as leaving little space for calm introductions, paced explanations and relational gestures that underpin safety and fairness for children. The police participants described how *“officers frequently redeployed; no continuity [and] criticism for spending time on de-escalation”* negatively impact children’s experiences of policing through the disruption of visibility and familiarity. Relatedly, the neighbourhood officers reported being repeatedly pulled into response, resulting in fewer opportunities for the everyday, low-intensity contact that children said helps them feel safe and build trust.

Multiple speakers overwhelm, and communication drifts in busy scenes.

As above, the police stakeholders acknowledged that in many encounters, particularly volatile or high-risk ones, multiple adults end up talking at the same time, overwhelming children and breaking the clarity needed for safe engagement. The officers also recognised that under pressure, communication often drifts back to legalistic or adult-centred language, precisely the type of communication children found confusing, alienating or frightening.

Performance cultures privilege speed over relational work.

The police stakeholders described a persistent cultural norm within policing that can undermine child-centred and de-escalatory practices. Officers who take time to communicate, regulate and build rapport with children can face scepticism or even ridicule from colleagues who view such approaches as soft or improper. As a Children and Young Persons' Inspector explained, while newer officers are often *“more engaging, more adaptive”*, some more traditional colleagues respond dismissively, such as with *“that 20-year-old sergeant looking at them going, ‘What are you doing airy fairy like that? Why don’t you just get them locked up?’”* This sentiment mirrors the “not a real cop” stigma raised elsewhere, highlighting how cultural pressures inside policing can work against the very relational practices that children and young people say make them feel safe.

Table 9.1: Summary of identified operational challenges to child-centred policing

Operational challenge	What officers said
Demand, pace and throughput pressures	High-volume, rapid-response environments leave little time for rapport building, explanation or reflective decision-making. The officers described being moved on quickly by control rooms and juggling multiple jobs.
Emotional labour and “criminal justice fatigue”	Repeated contact with the same child or young person can blunt empathy; the officers acknowledged struggling to maintain compassion when encountering the same child repeatedly in crisis.
Communication barriers (language, tone, developmental fit)	Legal/jargon-heavy language (e.g. “juveniles”, statutory terms) can confuse children and young people; tone, posture and fast speech can overwhelm, especially in crises or contexts involving neurodivergent children and young people or those with SEND.
Effective checks for understanding	The officers noted that asking “Do you understand?” is inadequate; children and young people often say yes out of fear or compliance.
Context-specific communication constraints	High-risk incidents (e.g. violence, volatile scenes) force officers to prioritise safety before introductions, explanations or reassurance; ideal sequencing is not always possible.
Continuity and relationship disruption	Frequent staff changes and redeployments (e.g. neighbourhood officers backfilling for responses) undermine relationship-based policing.
Limited capability and variable confidence	Many officers lack structured training in child development, trauma and neurodivergence/SEND communication; many rely on personal experience (e.g. being a parent) rather than professional development.
Neurodivergence and SEND: undiagnosed needs and sensory overload	Officers frequently encounter undiagnosed neurodivergence and SEND; sensory triggers (noise, movement, multiple officers) escalate distress. Adjustments must be universal, not diagnosis-dependent.
Procedural rigidity vs flexibility	Policies requiring specific scripts, steps or risk-management actions can undermine relational practices; officers feel torn between following procedures and supporting children and young people.
Privacy, dignity and discretion challenges	Officers support discreet actions (e.g. arresting out of public view), but feasibility/safety constraints mean children and young people sometimes experience public exposure and embarrassment.

Multi-agency practice barriers	Social care partners sometimes use scripted or adult-centred approaches; officers often have to “take the lead” to protect rapport with the child.
Variation in workforce skills and role fit	Not all officers naturally possess the communication style needed for child-centred policing; some excel in crisis roles but less so in relational work, and vice versa.
Adultification and misinterpretation of behaviour	Children and young people, especially Black boys, neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND, are misread as older, hostile, evasive or non-compliant, affecting tone and escalation.
Reduced neighbourhood visibility and proactive contact	Resource pressures mean officers are pulled from schools or community settings, limiting opportunities for routine, non-crisis engagement.
Lack of follow-up capacity	Children and young people frequently receive no updates on incidents or complaints; the officers acknowledged that follow-up is rare due to workload.
Overreliance on spoken communication	Children and young people with trauma, neurodivergence/SEND or language barriers may not process verbal explanations in the moment. The officers suggested alternative formats, such as written summaries, visual aids (e.g. diagrams, cue cards or step-by-step prompts), digital follow-up messages or the involvement of a trusted adult or advocate, to help reinforce understanding after the interactions.

Note: SEND = special educational needs and disabilities

9.5 What system leaders must do

The policing stakeholders strongly acknowledged that the frontline behaviours children and young people value most cannot be sustained without supportive organisational systems. Child-centred policing, they emphasised, cannot rely on individual officer skill alone but requires organisational change. Three system-level levers stood out as essential for enabling officers to deliver child-centred practices reliably and under pressure. See Table 9.2 for a fuller account of the systemic challenges in child-centred policing.

Accountability and assurance systems. The strategic participants highlighted the need for governance structures that make fairness, transparency and accuracy visible to children, to communities and to officers themselves. Two key themes arose in the discussions.

First, the officers described inconsistent activation and the slow release of body-worn video as undermining both credibility and children’s trust, particularly when contested accounts circulate quickly online. Leaders stressed the value of clear expectations on when body-worn video should be used, narrated rationales at the scene and timely release processes to support learning and accountability.

Second, what reaches the frontline is shaped in control rooms. The stakeholders emphasised the importance of bias-sensitive triage for calls involving children: scrutinising language, challenging

assumptions (e.g. “*groups of youths*”) and applying Right Care, Right Person (RCRP)²⁵ routing to avoid unnecessary criminalisation. The strategic police stakeholders described first-contact governance as one of the most powerful tools for preventing inequitable or disproportionate engagement. These assurance mechanisms establish predictability, fairness and legitimacy at the very start of an encounter, setting the conditions for child-centred practice.

Deployment, performance and supervision. The officers repeatedly noted that relational, child-paced practice is only feasible when performance frameworks and deployment models do not work against it.

The policing stakeholders spoke about the need to protect relational time. Neighbourhood and school-based officers described the value of everyday visibility and continuity for building trust, yet these roles are often eroded by the abstraction of response. The strategic participants emphasised the need to shield these functions so that officers can maintain the consistent presence that children say helps them feel safe.

The policing stakeholders also stressed that calm communication, explaining so that there are no surprises, asking the child to explain back to you, proportionality and de-escalation are skilled professional practices. Leaders acknowledged that these skills must be coached, modelled and reinforced, such as through body-worn video learning reviews, scenario practice and supervisory conversations that explicitly value relational communication, not just throughput. When performance regimes recognise these behaviours as core policing work rather than “*soft skills*”, officers can feel authorised to use them.

Child-appropriate environments and infrastructure. The participants highlighted that the physical and procedural environments in which children encounter police strongly shape their ability to regulate, communicate and feel safe. However, they also stressed that creating child-appropriate environments requires not only making physical adjustments but also addressing systemic barriers that currently limit their use. The officers described how most policing spaces remain noisy, unpredictable and sensory overloading, with children frequently exposed to “*sudden movements, multiple officers speaking... noises*” that can “*trigger sensory shocks*”. They highlighted structural constraints; constant redeployments that “*leave no continuity*”; high demand that pressures officers to take rapid control rather than offer slow, regulated communication; and cultural norms that dismiss relational approaches. The officers also reported public pressure to act forcefully rather than de-escalate and noted significant gaps in training around children’s communication needs and neurodivergence. These challenges underscore why system leaders must invest in adapted environments, universal sensory-aware communication standards and structural mechanisms that support predictability and partial continuity, so that child-centred practice becomes possible and sustainable across policing contexts.

²⁵ RCRP is a national approach used across policing, health and social care to ensure that people with health or social care needs receive a response from the most appropriate agency rather than having police being the default responders when they are not best placed to help (Home Office, 2025).

Table 9.2: Strategic challenges

Strategic challenge	What officers said
Command and control dominance	High-pressure contexts and legacy norms prioritise rapid incident control; relational/preventative work with children and young people is perceived as lower value.
Performance and redeployment pressures	Target regimes, scrutiny and resource strain drive redeployments (e.g. neighbourhood backfilling response), eroding continuity and routine visibility with children and young people.
Limited accountability beyond custody	Scrutiny and learning mechanisms are stronger in custody than in broader encounters; frontline officers rarely see the outcomes of complaints, weakening improvement cycles.
Patchy body-worn video practices and slow release	Inconsistent activation outside mandated contexts and delays in releasing footage undermine transparency and allow negative narratives to dominate.
Under-reporting of racist conduct and inaccessible redress for Black children and young people	Black children and young people lack confidence that complaints will be heard or lead to change; barriers to reporting and weak feedback loops sustain distrust.
Multi-agency fragility	High turnover, variable engagement and scripted/rigid approaches in partner agencies disrupt rapport with children and young people and complicate joint work.
Public confidence and “visible control” expectations	Community and political expectations for swift, assertive action in disorder can penalise de-escalatory, child-centred responses and increase pressure for enforcement.
Leadership demand signals misaligned with child-centred policing	Senior leadership’s emphasis on throughput (dashboards, targets, redeployments) sends signals that crowd out time/space for child-centred practice.
Training mandate gap	Optional e-learning and ad hoc training do not support consistent skill development, and there is currently no clear national mechanism to mandate such training.
Static or poorly accessible guidance	Paper/PDF resources are hard to access/update in real time; the lack of digital, device-friendly materials hinders uptake by frontline staff.
Inconsistent neurodivergent/SEND capability at scale	Workforce preparedness for neurodivergence/SEND communication is uneven; diagnosis backlogs mean many children and young people need adjustments that are not systematically built into standard operating designs.
Right person, first-contact not assured	Triage pathways rarely guarantee that the first officer has the skills/time required; children and young people must retell experiences and receive conflicting information.
Follow-up and repair not embedded	After tense encounters, a structured follow-up to restore trust and capture learning is not consistently built into workflows.

Note: SEND = special educational needs and disabilities

9.6 How the consultations map to the eight principles

Across both the operational and strategic groups, the police participants consistently confirmed that all eight child-centred policing principles are feasible in day-to-day practice, provided that organisational systems support them. The officers recognised the principles as realistic, familiar and closely aligned with the behaviours many already try to use, even if inconsistently applied under current pressures.

The operational officers emphasised that the principles translate into simple, repeatable actions that can be delivered even in busy or pressured environments – for example, using a single, clear lead speaker; maintaining plain language explanations; and adopting brief narration so children can anticipate what will happen next.

The strategic contributors confirmed that the principles also align well with existing governance structures. They identified practical levers, including body-worn video assurance, call-handling processes that explicitly check for bias and challenge stereotypes and strengthened supervision, that would help embed predictability, fairness and welfare-first decision-making across teams and units. They also affirmed the value of continuity-by-design models (e.g. single points of contact for schools and care homes) as realistic ways to make Principle 3 (Relational visibility and everyday familiarity) visible in everyday practices, despite shift patterns and abstractions.

Following the consultations, the research team translated these insights into an initial set of frontline-specific, concrete actions to demonstrate how each principle can be enacted moment-to-moment during encounters with children. A number of the police stakeholders reviewed these draft actions outside the consultation sessions to ensure they were operationally feasible, proportionate and usable across different roles and contexts.

9.7 Cross-cutting lenses: neurodivergence/special educational needs and disabilities; race and ethnicity; and place

As part of the consultation design, the police participants were invited to reflect specifically on how child-centred policing should operate for neurodivergent children and those with SEND, for Black and racially minoritised children and across different local contexts. These focused discussions confirmed that child-centred practices cannot be delivered through generic approaches alone. Instead, neurodivergence/SEND, race and ethnicity and place shape both what children need and what policing systems must provide. The officers viewed these lenses as baseline considerations that should be embedded in everyday decision-making and organisational design.

Neurodivergence and SEND. The police stakeholders advocated for universal adjustments to underpin all encounters with children, regardless of whether neurodivergence or SEND has been disclosed or diagnosed. The officers described frequent encounters with children whose communication needs or sensory profiles were not formally recognised, emphasising that relying on diagnosis is both unrealistic and unsafe. Long waiting lists, inconsistent documentation and children masking distress mean that

neurodivergence often remains unidentified, yet it has significant implications for how children understand and respond to police contact. The stakeholders argued for communication that is slow, concrete and steady, with a single clear speaker wherever possible. They emphasised the importance of quieter spaces, softer lighting, reduced radio noise and fewer adults present as key conditions for helping children regulate, process information and stay emotionally safe. The officers noted that such adjustments do not disadvantage neurotypical children; rather, they make interactions clearer and calmer for everyone. The consensus across operational and strategic groups was unequivocal: neurodivergence- and SEND-informed approaches must be universal by design, not conditional on diagnosis. Without this, officers risk misinterpreting behaviours linked to overload, anxiety or processing delays as defiance, causing unnecessary escalation and reinforcing children's mistrust.

Race and ethnicity. The policing stakeholders acknowledged that children's experiences of policing are shaped by racialised histories of trust and mistrust and that processes intended to safeguard can inadvertently produce over-policing for Black and racially minoritised young people. Some officers reflected that, with the intent to "help", they can unintentionally increase police presence around young people or communities, contributing to surveillance rather than support. This echoed children's accounts of disproportionate attention and adultification. The police participants stressed the importance of bias-sensitive triage at first contact, especially where reports of "groups of youths" or vague descriptions risk drawing policing disproportionately towards racially minoritised children. Leaders also highlighted the role of the consistent, transparent use of body-worn video, both in activation and in timely release, to maintain credibility in communities where trust is already fragile. Slow or inconsistent processes were described as fuelling scepticism, especially when social media narratives circulate rapidly.

The strategic contributors emphasised that addressing racial inequity cannot be left to individual officers' discretion; it requires structural governance, including clearer supervision, stronger accountability mechanisms and routine review of patterns of youth contact. These system-level checks were seen as essential for preventing adultification, ensuring fairness and safeguarding legitimacy.

Place. The officers noted substantial variation in how child-centred policing can be enacted across urban, rural and coastal settings. In high-demand urban environments, the officers reported more contested encounters, greater scrutiny via social media and more frequent calls involving groups of young people, all of which heighten the need for predictable communication, calm pacing and proportionate decision-making.

In rural and coastal forces, children may have far fewer routine encounters with police, meaning that when contact does occur, often during crises, it carries greater emotional weight. Here, relational continuity or even symbolic predictability ("the same officers visit the school") can have a disproportionately positive impact. The officers also highlighted practical differences: some forces had ready access to calmer interview rooms or multi-agency hubs, while others worked out of small stations or relied heavily on home visits, which affected their ability to create low-arousal environments.

9.8 Concluding observations and insights

Overall, the consultations underscored that the behaviours children value most are feasible for officers to deliver, but only when organisational conditions enable them. The key insights below capture what the police participants identified as critical for embedding child-centred practices across roles and contexts.

Cross-cutting chapter insights

- 1. Child-centred policing is built on simple, repeatable behaviours.** A calm tone, one clear lead speaker, plain-language explanations, narrating what is happening next and asking children and young people to repeat back to assess understanding can help children feel safe and able to engage. Consistency depends on system design rather than on individual effort alone. Demand pressures, abstractions, performance targets and procedural rigidity often prevent officers from working in child-centred ways. Aligned governance, supervision, body-worn video assurance and initial contacts that are explicitly checked for bias are essential.
- 2. Universal neurodivergence-informed adjustments and equity measures must be built in.** Slow pace; predictable sequencing; calm, low-arousal environments; and bias-sensitive triage benefit all children and prevent misinterpretation based on neurodivergence or race.
- 3. Police confirmed that all eight principles are feasible and practical.** The officers viewed them as realistic and operationally usable. Strategic leaders emphasised that embedding them depends on clear organisational support, continuity by design and leadership messaging that values relational communication.

Chapter 10. Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This study set out to develop an evidence-informed understanding of how children and young people experience child-centred policing across the different settings, roles and circumstances in which contact occurs. Drawing on a scoping review, qualitative fieldwork with 56 children and young people and a youth survey completed by 64 young people, the study sought to understand, in children's own terms, the interactional, procedural and relational conditions that shape trust and voice in police encounters. In addition, the study included a fifth, translational phase that involved consultations with operational and strategic police officers. These consultations explored how insights derived from children and young people could be operationalised in practice and embedded within policing systems.

Across all research elements, a consistent picture emerged: children and young people's experiences are shaped not only by the formal purpose of a police encounter but also by how they are spoken to, how predictable and fair the interaction feels, how far their emotional and sensory needs are recognised and what happens (or fails to happen) afterwards. While these observations remain stable across settings, their relative importance shifts in response to the demands and vulnerabilities of different environments.

10.2 Overarching summary of the findings

Across Chapters 4–6, children and young people described policing as being highly shaped by interactional tone, predictability, identity and context. Although the settings of the encounters varied widely, from streets and custody to homes, schools and transport, the underlying dynamics shaping their experiences were strikingly consistent.

First, children and young people emphasised that many police encounters felt unpredictable, adult-centred and emotionally unsafe, particularly in streets and public spaces and in custody, where abrupt communication, escalation, unclear processes and inconsistent care created fear, confusion and mistrust. These patterns were intensified for Black children and young people, who described racialised suspicion and adultification, and for neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND, who experienced sensory overload and their communication needs being misread or misunderstood.

Second, across settings, the core drivers of trust were consistent: calm, respectful communication; clear explanation; fairness; proportionate behaviour; and officers demonstrating human regard. Trust was built or lost through small interactional cues, especially within the first moments of contact, and was eroded when children and young people were dismissed, rushed, disbelieved or treated as adults rather than as children.

Third, children and young people's ability to express their views (voice) depended on the conditions officers created. Voice required privacy, emotional safety, time to think, accessible communication and tangible follow-through. Children and young people frequently reported being allowed to speak but not

genuinely heard, with their input often having little visible influence on decisions. For Black children and young people, neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND, voice was further constrained by racialised assumptions, adultification or the misinterpretation of communication needs.

Finally, while children and young people's core needs were stable across contexts, the weight placed on these needs shifted by setting. Custody required high predictability and care; street encounters required non-accusatory, de-escalatory behaviour; home settings required gentleness and reassurance; and public transport required privacy and role clarity. Across all contexts, children and young people highlighted the cumulative influence of direct, indirect and online experiences in shaping their expectations of policing.

The insights across Chapters 4–6 directly informed the development of the child-centred policing principles set out in Chapter 8. These principles synthesise what children and young people said they need to feel safe, respected and heard in police encounters, translating the recurring themes of trust, voice and emotional safety into a coherent framework for frontline practice. From these principles, the study generated specific, concrete actions that officers and staff can apply in day-to-day encounters, as set out in Chapter 7, forming the foundation of the accompanying operational resource designed to help officers embed child-centred policing in real time. Recognising that frontline practice depends on wider organisational conditions, the study also identified system-level insights for senior leaders and those with strategic influence, highlighting the structural, supervisory and cultural changes required to create the environments in which child-centred policing can be delivered consistently and sustainably.

10.3 Contribution to the wider evidence base

This study makes several distinctive contributions that extend current national and international research on children's experiences of policing.

1. A whole-system, multi-context perspective

Where much existing research focuses on single points of police contact, such as stop and search or custody, this study examines how children and young people experience policing across the full range of settings in which encounters occur: in the street and their communities, in custody, at home, at school and during transport. This broader lens reveals how children hold consistent expectations of clarity, fairness and emotional safety across all encounters, yet these expectations become heightened in different ways depending on the context, with particular environments amplifying the importance of certain needs and shaping how strongly children feel those expectations are met or unmet.

Importantly, the study engaged a diverse cohort of children and young people whose experiences of policing spanned multiple roles and contexts, including as civic actors, victims or witnesses of harm, justice-involved children and those who have both experienced and caused harm. Their accounts provide a uniquely holistic picture of how policing is lived and felt across children's everyday worlds.

2. Child- and young-person-based practice principles

The eight principles presented in the report translate children and young people's lived experiences into practice principles that underpin operationally specific guidance. The principles offer insight not only into *what* needs to change but also into *how* they must be supported strategically to embed and advance innovations in frontline practice. These principles add conceptual and practical clarity to existing national commitments, such as the NPCC Children and Young Persons Strategy and Children and Young Persons Policing Charter.

3. Deepened understanding of identity-linked inequities

This study adds further evidence to the racialised adultification and routine suspicion experienced by Black children in England across a range of interactions with police. It also provides detailed insights into the experiences and needs of children and young people who are neurodivergent or have SEND. Taken together, the findings show how multiple identity-linked factors intersect to shape children's experiences of policing, with race, neurodivergence, communication needs and prior victimisation often combining to heighten vulnerability, suppress voice and increase the risk of misinterpretation. Crucially, these inequities appear across all policing settings, not only in street encounters, underscoring the need for response models capable of recognising and addressing the intersecting identities and needs that shape how children are seen, understood and treated.

10.4 Insights for practice and policy

Child-centred policing is achieved not through individual goodwill or professional intent alone but through interactional and system conditions that consistently support children's safety, understanding, voice and fairness across contexts.

1. Children and young people's core needs remain stable, but context shapes the conditions required to meet them.

Across all forms of police contact, children and young people expressed consistent expectations of clarity, fairness, respect and emotional safety. What changed was not *what* they needed but *how* those needs had to be met in different settings. Custody heightened the importance of predictability and care; public spaces amplified the need for non-accusatory and de-escalatory engagement; and school and home settings required reassurance, familiarity and sensitive entry. This highlights that although the underpinning principles are consistent, child-centred policing cannot rely on uniform approaches. It requires context-responsive practices that adapt to the operational and emotional demands of each setting while holding children and young people's core needs constant.

2. Trust depends on interactional behaviour that signals safety, fairness and legitimacy.

The study found that children and young people assessed trust not just by the stated purpose or authority of police encounters but also by small interactional behaviours that signalled whether officers were safe, fair and legitimate. Tone, pacing, clarity, proportionality and being treated as a child were

central to whether trust was established or eroded. These interactional signals were particularly consequential for Black children and young people, neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND, whose experiences of adultification, racialised suspicion and/or sensory overload meant that everyday policing behaviours could either mitigate or reproduce existing inequalities.

3. Children and young people made clear that feeling heard required more than being given an opportunity to speak.

In addressing children's accounts of voice, the study found that being heard was not about permission to talk but about the conditions in which communication took place. Children and young people felt heard when officers created predictable, emotionally safe and developmentally appropriate environments, including privacy, time to process and genuine interest in their perspectives, followed by a clear explanation of how their views informed decisions. Voice was weakest in fast-paced, coercive or highly stressful encounters and for Black children and young people, neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND, whose communication was more frequently misinterpreted or marginalised. This demonstrates that supporting children's voice requires structured practices rather than reliance on individual goodwill.

4. Identity shapes how police encounters are experienced and their emotional impact.

The study found that identity played a central role in how children and young people experienced policing, not as an isolated factor but as something that shaped the overall emotional tone, safety and meaning of encounters. Black children and young people described how adultification and racialised suspicion influenced whether they felt believed, protected or treated fairly, while neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND highlighted how unmet sensory and communication needs heightened distress and misunderstanding. These identity-specific patterns cut across trust, voice and emotional safety, demonstrating that child-centred policing must address structural inequities and differential needs rather than relying solely on improvements in interpersonal skill.

5. Police encounters gain meaning through their accumulation over time and across communities.

Children and young people understood policing through the accumulation of personal experiences, observed interactions involving others and powerful online and community narratives. This broader context meant that individual encounters were rarely experienced in isolation; instead, they were interpreted as part of an ongoing pattern of how police treat children and young people. In settings where prior experiences or circulating narratives were negative, each interaction carried heightened significance, with the potential to either entrench mistrust or rebuild confidence. This finding underscores the importance of consistent, fair and transparent practices, as child-centred policing is shaped as much by pattern and predictability as by any single encounter.

6. Embedding child-centred policing requires organisational alignment, not just individual effort.

The study showed that many of the changes children and young people valued most could not be delivered solely through individual officer behaviour. Although interactional practice was crucial,

children's experiences highlighted the decisive role of system conditions, including leadership priorities, accountability, supervision, training, continuity and organisational capacity for follow-through. Where these conditions were absent, even well-intentioned officers struggled to deliver consistent child-centred practice. Embedding child-centred policing, therefore, requires organisational alignment that matches the expectations placed on frontline staff, ensuring that supportive practice is reliable and sustainable and not dependent on individual goodwill.

10.5 Closing reflection

Children and young people were clear that they notice and remember *how* police interact with them – whether they are treated as children, whether anyone listens and whether their experiences shape what happens next. These insights offer a compelling case for a policing model that consistently centres clarity, fairness, dignity and emotional safety. By articulating concrete steps that align with existing national strategies (such as those detailed in Chapter 1), this study provides a strong foundation for sector-wide work to make child-centred policing a practical reality.

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