

Wasted Youth: Prioritising Youth Services and Juvenile Justice – A Policy Imperative

The High Sheriff of Oxfordshire's Law Lecture 2026 – sponsored by Blake Morgan

Delivered by Lord Paul Boateng

At the invitation of John May CVO OBE DL, High Sheriff of Oxfordshire

Lord Lieutenant, High Sheriff, Your Worships, Chief Constable - and, as I learned to say in South Africa: *all the feathers of the eagle*.

Isn't that a wonderful expression? All the feathers of the eagle - because if you think of that great bird (the symbol of so many countries, and of the African continent), the eagle and all its feathers: different weights, different sizes, different shapes, different colours. All of them are needed so that the eagle may soar.

That is what you all are: all feathers of the eagle. That is our justice system - whether as students, whether as people working in the field, in the voluntary or statutory sector around youth and youth justice. Each and every one of you a feather of the eagle that makes that bird.

So, John - High Sheriff - I am honoured to be giving your lecture this evening. Thank you not just for the invitation, but for all your work in the county. Word has spread, John, about that. Never a man to be kept far from the cake stand - that's the word that got back to me. Maybe I wrong you; maybe I don't. But be that as it may: your work in the county reflects a lifelong commitment to the enablement and empowerment of young people - not just in this county, or this country, but globally - through your engagement with Scouting, and also through your years of distinguished service as Chief Executive of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award International Foundation, which I too had the honour to support for successive Dukes of Edinburgh.

I want to say something, if I may. John, you gave us your version of it, but let me say something about the shrievalty. There are a number of past High Sheriffs here - those who have held your office. It is, as you say, one of the oldest offices in English governance: the King's local administrator responsible for tax collection, law enforcement, military mustering, judicial and administrative appointments of one sort or another, for over a thousand years.

I am glad to say, though, that the wilder excesses of your predecessors in office - particularly under Bad King John - were curbed by Magna Carta. Put in 1215, it put an end to some of your activities, particularly in the field of tax collection - very rightly handed over to HM Treasury and the Inland Revenue.

But be that as it may, for me - as a former Minister for Young People in the Department of Health, as a former Police Minister and Prisons Minister, and indeed later as Chief Secretary - I learned, particularly in the justice sector, how important the shrievalty is throughout our country in bringing the voluntary and statutory sectors together; linking the police with the wider community; involving corporate and personal philanthropy in support of the justice and penal systems.

A hugely important role. Not least because it creates an opportunity to convene - to bring together volunteers and people in the statutory sector; people prepared to give around justice, prisons, probation, correction. At best, that has proved a source of innovation and community engagement.

So, thanks to the shrievalty - and to all of you in this room who, in your different functions, support it.

And I would argue - and will seek to argue in the course of this lecture - that these linkages, and the importance of *safe space* to discuss issues, are vital: spaces where you can say what is in your heart and mind without fear. We have to hang on to such spaces, do we not, Dean? Because there are forces seeking to cut down the number of places where it is possible to speak safely, freely, and openly - so we have to protect those spaces.

And also: importantly, non-politicised spaces - hugely important at a time when so much has become politicised, so much has become polarised. Spaces where you can promote multidisciplinary work - people with different skills, different abilities, different backgrounds, different professional training, and viewpoints - coming together.

This is all the more important at a time of scarce resources, fragmented authority, and - it must be said and confronted - declining trust and social cohesion. Declining trust and social cohesion.

I have been around a bit. Looking around this room - I am not quite the oldest, perhaps - but I am amongst the oldest. I go back a bit. Think flares; think afro. I laugh so loud - I used to have hair.

My working life is now over half a century - well over sixty if you include having a window-cleaning round - but over fifty years if you include having a professional qualification. And I have never lived in a time in which there was so little trust, never lived in a time with such a degree of fragmentation.

So I would argue it has never been more important to bring people together - to strengthen a community response to the societal challenges we face: threats to the welfare and wellbeing of young people through alienation, polarisation, crime, antisocial behaviour, increasing mental health problems, and absence of access to adequate education, meaningful training, and gainful employment.

I don't like the term NEET, but it does, I'm afraid, sum up the experience of all too many young people in our society today.

And so I have taken as the basis of my remarks - and for our sharing with each other today, because I hope we are going to have a conversation - the theme: "Wasted Youth: prioritising youth services and juvenile justice - a policy imperative."

Youth is a precious asset, not least in a country such as ours which faces - frankly - a demographic time bomb. An ever-growing number of elderly people (an ever-growing number of us), with all the demands that makes on healthcare and other forms of public spending. Linked with a declining birth rate and a shortage of young people entering the labour market - and entering meaningful employment with the requisite skills. Those skills are central for the growth our economy needs in productivity and output, if we are to support an ageing population. That is the economic reality of the time in which we live.

And the irony is this: age-related spending - and, you know, I am a former Treasury Minister, a former Chief Secretary - the economy matters; public spending matters; taxes matter. You cannot have a conversation of the sort we want to have if you do not take that as a given.

Age-related spending is largely non-discretionary. Healthcare and social care are seen as political and moral imperatives. Heaven help the politician who does not recognise the imperative of provision for health and social care.

But the costs, when compared with spending on young people, mean that youth spending is treated as discretionary: you can or you can't; you can if you wish; but if you don't want to, you don't have to. That is the attitude.

Yet the irony is that spending on education and training is amongst the few public expenditures that reduce future welfare spending, increase future tax receipts, and build resilience against economic shocks. Unlike much spending on the elderly.

But we consistently - consistently, under governments of all persuasions - underinvest in young people. The result is an intergenerational imbalance that undermines social cohesion. That is not just unfair - it is macroeconomically destabilising.

That is an uncomfortable truth for someone of my age, and for a number of you. I do not regard my bus pass as an unfair imposition - I believe I have earned it, and indeed we have. But if we are to enjoy our bus passes, we also have to recognise we must change our mindset when it comes to spending on young people. We have to make the sums add up. And we have to make sure the policy prescriptions we develop are funded in a way that meets the fiscal challenges, and invests in young people - not just because it is the right thing, but because it is the only economically sane thing to do.

So, we have to rebuild local civic capacity around young people - with the voluntary, private and statutory sectors, and national and local government, acting as delivery platforms for human capital investment - especially for those not currently in education, employment or training.

And where young people come into contact through antisocial behaviour or low-level offending - particularly where drugs are involved - when they come into contact with the criminal justice system, surely the objective must be early intervention: to divert them into non-custodial alternatives.

Those alternatives should not be a soft option. If properly funded, they are anything but. They are non-custodial and involve engagement with the community.

And where custodial settings are unavoidable - and one lesson I learned as Prisons Minister is that sometimes they are unavoidable, and it is necessary to lock young people up - when that is done, there must be a focus on education and training interventions that provide skills for effective rehabilitation.

I have seen that work in practice. You have seen it, John, through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. I saw, as Prisons Minister, work being done in Reading with young offenders, and the role of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award delivered in custodial settings. Not without challenges: how do you have an adventurous journey in a correctional setting? Not easy - but doable.

And John and I have seen in South Africa the Award integrated into the juvenile correction system - not an add-on; part of the system. And we know, because the statistics bear it out, that it works.

So we have to be prepared to be innovative. We have to be prepared to take managed risk

And there is something very wrong when, despite the reduction in the numbers of children held in custody (the lowest since records began - something to be pleased about, and not an accident but a result of deliberate policy), we nonetheless have to be concerned that 40% of those in custody are on remand, not convicted - and that of those who go on to be convicted, 60% never receive a custodial sentence in the end. That begs the question: what are they doing in custody on remand in the first place?

We also have to face the reality that while numbers are dropping, the complexity of problems those young people face - profound trauma, illness - means early intervention is absolutely vital if there is to be any hope of curbing offending, enabling rehabilitation, and turning lives around.

The current minister responsible for juvenile justice, [name unclear in transcript], has spoken of the biggest transformation of youth justice in a generation. I applaud that sentiment, having made a similar promise myself, along with Alan Michael and ably assisted by Lord Warner, and in 1998 inaugurating the Youth Justice Board. It has brought down the numbers held in custody; it has been judged a success in those terms.

But the scale of ambition - including the laudable determination to end custodial sentences for girls - faces obstacles: lack of fiscal headroom and pressures elsewhere in the criminal justice system. The ambition is welcome, but it will require support.

My time in government taught me a number of key lessons.

First: no government of any political persuasion - however well-meaning or competent - can deliver for young people on its own. Partnerships are key: public and private, statutory and non-statutory, local and central government; multidisciplinary partnerships across health, youth, criminal justice, and social work, recognising the professional skills of each.

If you look at this room, those skills are present - alongside, I am happy to say, the vigour of youth.

Partnership is a slippery word. Politicians like it - it has a warm, soft, touchy-feely ring. But the reality is very different. Professional partnerships require hard work: willingness to give and take, honest communication, willingness to accept scrutiny and criticism. Partnerships take us out of our comfort zone. But when you put the work in, there is nothing more transformative.

And if you are to establish partnerships that deliver, you have to incentivise them; sometimes require them; create ring-fenced and pooled budgets. Otherwise our natural reaction is to hold on to what we have, not to share it.

And High Sheriffs - past and present - you know that partnerships also need to be rewarded and recognised. It is part of your job to say: well done. We do not do enough of that. People on the front line are hard pressed - prison officers, police officers, youth workers, teachers, health workers. We need communication that is affirming and enabling.

Second: no policy designed to help young people is effective without young people actively engaged in its design, wherever possible involved in its delivery, and always in its evaluation. And you have to do more than go through the motions.

But nevertheless, the scale of ambition in those sentiments - and particularly the determination Jacob Richards has expressed, entirely laudable, to end custodial sentences for girls - must be set against the lack of fiscal headroom and the pressures elsewhere in the criminal justice system. Those will prove obstacles to the achievement of that ambition.

So while the ambition is applauded, Jake does have my sympathy. He is going to require all our support - and our systems are going to require all our support - if we are to deliver on that promise.

My experience in government taught me a number of key lessons.

The first is this: no government of any political persuasion, however well-meaning or competent, can deliver for young people on its own - whether in youth justice, or generally in health, education, or employment.

Partnerships are the key. Partnerships are central: between public and private sector; between statutory and non-statutory; between local and central government. Multidisciplinary partnerships between health, youth and criminal justice, and social work - with recognition of the professional skills of each.

If you look at this room, all those skills are present - alongside, I am happy to say, the vigour of youth. And we need all those things: vigour and youthful determination, and the professional skills and commitment - through professional work or voluntary action - to do something about it.

But “partnership” is one of those rather slippery words. Politicians are keen on it. It has a warm, soft, touchy-feely ring. Of course, the reality of partnerships is very different, isn't it?

Now, I am talking about professional partnerships - not personal partnerships. We know personal partnerships are all warm, soft and touchy-feely; there is nothing there that is anything but that!

But joking apart, the reality of all partnerships is that they require hard work. They require willingness to give and take. They require willingness to arrive at a common position through honest, open communication - and a willingness to submit oneself to scrutiny and criticism that is not always comfortable.

Partnerships, if they are going to work, take us out of our comfort zone. That we know. But we know also that when you put the work in, there is nothing so transformative. Nothing better, or more liberating.

And I learned in government that if you are to establish partnerships that deliver, you have to incentivise them. You have to be prepared, where necessary, to require them - to make them mandatory. You have to have ring-fenced and pooled budgets. You need all of those things. Otherwise, our natural reaction is to hold on to what we have - not to share it. Our natural reaction is to find comfort and safety in our professional training and professional orientation.

So partnerships have to be incentivised; they have to be encouraged. And indeed, High Sheriffs - past and present - you know too how they have to be rewarded and recognised.

It is very much part of your job, High Sheriff - and your job, those of you who are past High Sheriffs - to say to people: *well done*. And we do not always do enough of that.

People on the front line are hard pressed - and believe you me: prison officers, police officers, youth workers, teachers, health workers - are hard pressed and on the front line. We do need to say thank you, and we do need to recognise them. We need an environment, in terms of communication, that is more affirming and enabling for people doing difficult, difficult jobs.

So that is the first lesson I learned and share.

The second is this: no policy designed to help young people is ever effective without young people having been actively engaged in its design; wherever possible, involved in its delivery; and always in its evaluation.

And you have to do more than go through the motions.

When I was in my first job - the lowest rung of the ministerial ladder, as a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department of Health - I had responsibility for young people in care. We set up a working party on young people in care, and I suggested to highly sceptical officials that maybe we ought to have a young person in care - or a number of young people in care - on the committee.

It was not immediately welcome. Because people quickly realised it would require quite a bit of work; it would not be entirely comfortable; and it would not be without risk. There is risk in it.

When a civil servant says to you, "You're a very brave Minister," they mean it - and it is a warning.

But we did have a young person in care - a remarkable young woman - on that working group. What we had to do was ensure she was supported by a panel of young people, and that that panel was in turn supported by a group of adults - so nobody felt isolated, on their own, or vulnerable - and so that the work was done in a way that made their contribution meaningful.

So it matters that we do not go for gimmicks. We must make a reality of young people's contribution - but we have to do it properly.

And the government, to its credit, with the National Youth Strategy - published in December of last year, called *Youth Matters* - recognises this. It sets out a bold ten-year vision based on research and engagement with over 14,000 young people. Young people were actively involved in its formulation.

But Alice Weaver - an academic who has undertaken important research and analysis of previous youth strategies, and reflected on her own experience of them - makes a very important point. And I want to quote her directly.

She says that *Youth Matters* marks a return to intentional youth policy-making at a national level, following fifteen years in which youth policy was defunded through austerity, deprioritised, responsibility passed to underfunded local authorities, and delivery fragmented through isolated funding streams and services unable to operate where resources were absent.

But she warns - and I think this is important, and government needs to hear it - that while *Youth Matters* signals a move towards a more holistic view of young people, by aiming to work across departments to improve policies affecting all aspects of young people's lives, the real test will be whether policies outside DCMS stick to the supportive tone and ambition of the strategy, and remove the structural barriers facing young people - particularly in relation to poverty, education, housing and health.

The point she makes is this: it may be that a particular department produces a strategy, but unless it is owned and bought into by everybody, then it is doomed.

And she is right.

Now, I've got form in this. You understand what I mean by that, Chief Constable - don't get the wrong impression - but I've got form as long as your arm.

I have been part of the machinery of government, and I have been within a department where I personally failed to win the argument as Chief Secretary in two particular areas.

I am very proud of the document *Every Child Matters*, which lingers to this day in government. It is still seen as a seminal piece of work, and rightly so. A great many people – across departments, in communities, and young people themselves – put enormous work and effort into it. And I am proud of that.

But I failed in two important respects.

The first was that we missed the opportunity for a machinery-of-government change.

When I say that, I mean that the argument was lost. I lost the argument. Resistance was too great to secure genuine, across-government support.

I argued – and many of those who gave evidence to *Every Child Matters* argued – for a Ministry for Young People. We believed, and I believe rightly, that there needed to be a clear focus for cross-departmental work that sat outside the Home Office as it then was (now the Ministry of Justice), outside Health, and outside Education – but brought them all together around the needs of young people.

And crucially, that ministry and that minister should sit within the Cabinet Office. Why? Because the Prime Minister – who heads the Cabinet Office – is the one figure who can oblige everyone else to work together.

We lost that argument.

The role of Minister for Young People remained largely within the Department for Education – and in my view remains there to this day in terms of emphasis. That is where the resistance came from. It is no state secret. The then Secretary of State for Education did not want that ministry anywhere other than in his department.

Why did we oppose that view? Because if you house the Minister for Young People within the Department for Education, schools always win over everything else. They win over health. They win over justice. They win over employment. It all becomes about schools – because that is what the Department for Education is fundamentally about.

And we lost that argument. We are living with the consequences to this day.

Schools – and criminal justice – crowd out the wider preventative actions that are necessary if we are to avoid school failure in the first place, and avoid young people ending up in correctional settings and under the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice.

That battle was lost.

The second battle we lost was over whether we should strengthen the statutory duty on local authorities to provide youth services.

The argument was simple: if you do not make it mandatory for local authorities to spend money on youth services, then inevitably the bulk of spending will go on older people's social care, and on dealing with young people when all else has failed and they have been taken into care – and, of course, on potholes and everything else local authorities are required to do.

That was our fear, and our belief. And it motivated our attempt to go beyond the existing wording of the Act.

Section 507B of the 1996 Act requires councils to meet the needs of young people with “sufficient” youth services – but *sufficient* is defined by reference to what is “reasonably practicable”. And you all know what those words mean, and how they have been interpreted by guidance since.

The result is this: since 2010, local authority funding for youth provision has declined in real terms by 73%. Seventy-three per cent. £1.2 billion gone. A thousand youth centres closed. Four and a half thousand youth workers’ jobs lost – never replaced.

And although spending has levelled out somewhat more recently, as one would hope given promises made over the last eighteen months, the scale of underinvestment remains stark.

If you spent £158 per child in England in 2010–11, by 2023–24 that had fallen to around £50 per head. That is the extent of the underinvestment in young people. And the most deprived local authorities have faced the deepest cuts – spending per young person down by around 59% on average.

That is the context in which we are now required to address the current crisis facing young people today – the complexity of the problems experienced by social workers, prison officers, probation officers, police officers, the youth workers who remain, and teachers.

In some schools, teachers report that 60% of children arrive in nappies. These statistics should give us pause for thought.

Something has to be done. Something *must* be done.

I began my professional life as a solicitor working at the Paddington Law Centre on the Harrow Road. My criminal caseload was made up entirely of young people under the age of eighteen. It was a community law centre, funded by Westminster Council, by legal aid, by the Citizens Advice movement, and by corporate and private donors.

Our focus was housing, families, welfare, and young people. The only crime work we did was youth crime. We supported young people excluded from school, helped parents challenge exclusions, and worked on statements of special educational needs.

And at that time – and it happened to be a Conservative local authority – there was an absolute commitment to youth services...

Something has to be done.

I began my professional life as a solicitor at the Paddington Law Centre on the Harrow Road. My criminal caseload was made up entirely of young people under the age of eighteen. It was a community law centre, funded by Westminster Council, by legal aid, by the Citizens Advice movement, and by corporate and private donors.

Our work focused, as you would expect, on housing, families, welfare, and young people. The only crime work we undertook was youth crime. We supported young people excluded from school, helped parents challenge exclusions, and worked on statements of special educational needs.

At that time, it happened to be a Conservative local authority – but it was one absolutely committed to its youth service. We had two detached youth workers operating between the Harrow Road and Lisson Grove. We had a wide range of youth clubs across both the statutory and non-statutory sectors.

I was a fresh young solicitor – flares and afro, as I keep saying – working alongside people I will never forget: the Reverend and Mrs Duff; Inspector Graham Darke; and Norton McLean. You remember the people who matter in your first job, don't you? Those people mattered to me.

Paddington was a tough neighbourhood. Harrow Road police station was a tough police station. But Inspector Darke recognised the importance of working with youth clubs, and he served on the management committee – as did I.

Whatever else was happening in court or at the police station, we found a space where we could come together in the youth club. And the local authority had the Westminster Youth Council, with young people sitting alongside the rest of us.

What we were doing, in effect, was constructing at a local level the means by which people were brought together – across professions, across institutions, and across generations.

When I looked at what is happening here in Oxfordshire, in your patch, High Sheriff, I was struck by the approach Oxfordshire County Council is taking. Let me quote Councillor Gall:

“Youth work is not a luxury, but a necessity. It is a cornerstone of our preventative approach, helping young people build resilience, access opportunities, and thrive in their communities. We are not required to provide targeted youth support services – we do so because we believe passionately that support should be in place locally for young people at risk of exploitation, youth violence, and social isolation.”

That is absolutely right. That is what it has to be about.

And that approach has to be supported.

The challenge for us is how we mobilise to do just that – and it is not something that can be left to governments and politicians alone.

And so I begin to draw my remarks to a close.

We all have roles to play – whether as citizens, academics, young people deciding what to do with our lives, or older people volunteering and working in our professions. What we must do is find ways to come together to drive the policy changes that are needed, and then to deliver the implementation that must follow.

This is not just about policy-makers and funders. It is about practitioners. We are going to have to work more closely together than we have in the past. We need to build services around young people through multidisciplinary teams.

There are models for this. The law centre movement I referred to earlier, which began some fifty years ago at the start of my own professional career, has had its ups and downs as funding has ebbed and flowed. But there are examples of best practice today.

The Youth Justice Legal Centre and the Children's Law Centre provide potential models for the creation of local children's legal hubs – staffed by specialist children's law practitioners working alongside other disciplines, including the police and the CPS – to divert children pre-arrest, or to

work with those already in the criminal justice system to get them out of it altogether, and to create alternatives to custody that are rigorous, structured, and properly funded.

Now, a government that says it is concerned about delays in the criminal justice system – so much so that it proposes to abolish jury trials for many cases, an institution almost as old as your own office, High Sheriff, though that is an argument for another day – a government that claims to be concerned about legal aid pressures, reducing the number of children in custody, and improving outcomes for young people, must be able to rely on all of us – in our professions and in academia – to be partners in that process.

It must support a youth service that works with youth specialists and the legal profession.

Dean, you know this as well as I do: I cut my teeth in the juvenile courts. I had no training whatsoever in youth justice. I can remember the first court I ever appeared in – Camberwell Green Juvenile Court – and Lady Howe, Geoffrey Howe's wife, a wonderful woman, who was the chief juvenile magistrate.

Her concern, rightly, was education. The word in the profession was that if you produced a good education report, you would be treated leniently. So you spent your time making sure you had one.

But the truth is this: the legal profession is the only profession involved in youth justice that requires no specialist training at all before being allowed to practise in juvenile courts. Social workers have specialist training. Youth custody officers have specialist training. Police officers dealing with vulnerable young people receive specialist training. Lawyers do not.

That cannot be right. And it has to change.

We need conversations in all our professional settings that place young people at the heart of what we do. We must face up to the fact that what we have now is not working. And each of us – everyone in this room – has a role to play in shaping something new.

We need conversations. And, as you said, High Sheriff, the shrievalty is a good place to have them. But those conversations must lead to action – to activism that generates resources, not just from government, but from the private sector and from corporate philanthropy. Resources pooled through collaboration, and a willingness to act on what we hear from young people themselves.

And crucially, young people must know that we are not simply paying lip service to what they say, but that we are mobilising the resources to make a real difference.

This is a good place – as an academic institution and as part of the shrievalty – to begin those conversations. But they must not end here. They must go out from here.

So let us embrace that challenge in the spirit of a word – a Zulu and Xhosa word – an exhortation. John, you may have heard me use it before.

The word is Vukuzenzele.

You can Google it – V-I-K-U-Z-E-N-Z-E-L-E.

It means this: when you know something has to be done, you get up, you get out there, and you just do it.

Vukuzenzele.

Get up. Get out there. Just do it.

Because the prize is worth it: young people empowered, enabled, and free to fulfil their potential – free from crime, antisocial behaviour, and the traps of missed opportunity.

Empowered young people. Enabled young people. Young people fulfilling their potential.

Vukuzenzele.

Thank you very much.