



20 July 2010

Ref: 27/2010

## Media Release

# Custodial sentences for children halved

The number of children given custodial sentences has more than halved in Portsmouth over the last two years the Safer Portsmouth Partnership is pleased to report today.

The total number of offences committed by children\* has dropped by a 25% since 2005, currently standing at 606 convictions in 2009. Of these, only 3.6% (no.22) received a custodial sentence, less than half the amount of 2006. Portsmouth magistrates also reported that those appearing in front of them tend to be committing less serious crimes compared to ten years ago with theft and handling being the most common.

Since 2001 the council, local charities, such as Motiv8 and Wessex Youth Offending Team have worked in partnership and invested wisely in preventative schemes, such as the Preventing Youth Offending Project\* – the first of it's kind in the UK.

There has been longstanding consensus nationally amongst local authorities, charities and their partners that prevention is both intuitively and demonstrably better than cure. A significant shift in investment to allocating money both to "picking up the pieces" projects (e.g. ASBOs, ABCs etc) as well as early intervention and prevention has been called for over a number of years and here in Portsmouth, the SPP has made young people one of their four long term priorities in making Portsmouth a safer place to live, work and visit ...and their foresight is now paying off.

Gathering funding from local, national and European sources, Youth Crime Prevention initiatives such as PYOP, Catch22 and Motiv8 work with young people who have been identified as being prolific offenders or who have been convicted of a high number of offences , need specialist help, such as keeping safe, risk assessments or treatment packages .

NCH Action for Children's "Backing the Future" report published in September 2009 revealed that it costs an average of £140,000 a year to send a young person to custody, and for every £1 invested in their targeted services, designed to catch problems early, society benefits by £7.60 to £9.20. This investment in prevention is a positive step, as the young offenders aren't likely to cost the city as much in the future, for example in housing benefit costs.

Bruce Marr, project manager of the preventing youth offending project, said: "This is very encouraging news; it is clear evidence that the work between Portsmouth City Council, the voluntary sector and Wessex Youth Offending Team is having positive outcomes. It goes to show that investment and prevention have real long term benefits."

Ian Langley Head of Wessex Youth Offending Team said: "It costs a tremendous amount of money to lock a young person up and the reoffending rates for young people leaving custody is high. The sustained preventative work undertaken over the last few years by the City Council, voluntary agencies and Wessex Youth Offending Team, costs less than custody and has reduced the numbers of young people committing crime in the City leading to only a few receiving custodial sentences."

Cllr Eleanor Scott, cabinet member for community safety said: "I am pleased to hear custodial sentences for children are continuing to reduce year on year. We should be doing everything we can to avoid putting children in jail – it really should be a last resort. If children are locked up for less than a year, then they are not entitled access to training programmes or other benefits that may help them change their behaviour and consequently their actions. There are some excellent community based programmes that young offenders can access and I believe that magistrates should consider these in the first instance."

## **ENDS**

### **Notes to editors**

\* young people under 18 years old

\*\* Safer Portsmouth Partnership is a group of statutory and voluntary community organisations that meet regularly and work together to reduce crime, substance misuse and the fear of crime. Our goal is to make Portsmouth a safe place to live, work and visit.

### **About the Preventing Youth Offending Project**

PYOP was set up in 1998 and is the only project of its kind in the country. It is unique because it provides a response service to prevent offending, working with young people and their families.

The project works with young people who:

- have been identified as being prolific offenders or who have been convicted of a high number of offences

- need specialist help, such as keeping safe, risk assessments or treatment packages for juvenile sex offenders
- would benefit from preventative input, such as outdoor pursuits, challenging anti-social behaviour groups and drama

The young people are offered one to one social support, education support, group work provision, anger management, counseling, outdoor activities and a range of workshops. Parents are supported in a range of ways, as are their brothers and sisters.

The project also manages the cities Family Champion service and two Youth Inclusion Panels (YISPs). A total of 15 staff are employed to run this service.

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