

- provision of bail information, bail supervision and support;
- the preparation of pre-sentence reports;
- throughcare and supervision of young offenders who have been released from custody; and
- preventative work, including the supervision of Parenting and Child Safety Orders.

#### The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales

To provide a clear national framework for local action to tackle youth offending, these services are being provided in accordance with national standards drawn up by a new Youth Justice Board for England and Wales. The Board provides a clear focus for youth justice issues and a coherent framework for setting standards and monitoring the performance of local agencies and the operation of the youth justice system as a whole.

#### Reducing delays

A major component of the government's aim to improve the performance of the youth justice system consists of new measures to reduce delays and fast-track persistent young offenders. It takes on average nearly 4 months for a young person who commits an offence to be sentenced. Imagine, as a parent, waiting until next January to deal with your child's misbehaviour. For children, such a time can seem like an eternity, with the result that, when they finally appear before the court, they may hardly be able to recall the crime which brought them there in the first place.

Delays also add to the anger, frustration and distress experienced by victims and can affect the local community too. During the time that young people are awaiting trial on bail, the most persistent offenders continue their offending, so that by the time the case comes to trial they have not just one, but a string of offences to answer for.

To reduce delays, the Government has introduced statutory time limits for all offenders, with stricter limits for young offenders, particularly persistent young

offenders. The limits set down the maximum time that a case should take at every stage from arrest to sentence - excluding only the actual trial proceedings in contested cases. They are accompanied by performance targets, which are closely monitored at local and national level.

The Government has also pledged to halve the time taken from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders and Youth Courts are being encouraged to introduce special fast-tracking schemes for such offenders. Persistent young offenders are defined as those who have been sentenced by a criminal court on three or more separate occasions for one or more offences and within three years of the last sentencing occasion is subsequently arrested for a further offence. Persistent young offenders are now flagged up and prioritised at some or all stages of proceedings in some youth courts and targets are set for each stage of the fast-tracking process. So far, delays in dealing with persistent young offenders have come down from an average of 142 days in 1996 to **90 days this year**. The Government has promised to reduce this to an average of 71 days by March 2001.

As with many of the other proposals, monitoring will play a key role in establishing the effectiveness of the new fast-tracking schemes, but it will be equally important to ensure that the drive for speedier justice doesn't undermine the rights of offenders. And there is some concern about the tension between reducing delays and restorative justice - to work, restorative justice needs time.

#### *The new pragmatism*

***Perhaps one of the most significant changes in the current Government's approach to implementing reform is its insistence on a pragmatic, evidence-based approach, which draws on the findings of research and carefully monitors and reviews progress. A good example of this is the new Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO). Research has now clearly demonstrated that regular use of harmful drugs, such as heroin and crack cocaine, is highly***