EUROPE

NATALIE PICKEN, KERRY BAKER, CAMILLA D'ANGELO, CLÉMENT FAYS, LUCY STRANG, ALEX SUTHERLAND

Process Evaluation of AssetPlus

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Table of contents

Figures iv

Tables vi

Boxes vii

Abbreviations ix

Acknowledgements x

Executive Summary 1

1. Introduction 6

1.1. AssetPlus and the reasons for its introduction 6

1.2. Implementation of AssetPlus 11

1.3. Research questions, study approach and limitations 13

1.4. Structure of the report 17

2. The perceived impact of AssetPlus on working practices, roles and responsibilities, and operational efficiencies 18

2.1. Practitioners and managers reported that completing assessments using AssetPlus added to their workload 19

2.2. Some interviewees reported that they did not feel AssetPlus was a time-efficient framework 19

2.3. Features of AssetPlus that were considered to make it a time-consuming tool 20

2.4. AssetPlus was perceived to be disproportionately time-consuming when used to assess children requiring little YOT intervention 26

2.5. AssetPlus was perceived to be onerous in YOTs with high caseloads 28

2.6. YOTs' interpretations of quality assurance and review requirements may be a factor in why AssetPlus was considered time-consuming 28

2.7. The perceived time-consuming nature of AssetPlus affected practitioners' roles, responsibilities and working practices 30

2.8. Interviewees and survey respondents had mixed views about how far AssetPlus encourages multi-agency working 30

2.9. AssetPlus encouraged the use of practitioners' professional judgement 31

3. The perceived impact of AssetPlus on the quality of assessments and intervention plans 34
3.1. Considerable variation in perceptions of whether AssetPlus supports high-quality assessment.....35
3.2. Features of AssetPlus that supported high-quality assessment 36
3.3. Features of AssetPlus that were felt to hinder high-quality assessment.....40
3.4. External factors affected the extent to which AssetPlus was felt to support high-quality assessment..43
3.5. There was considerable variation in perceptions of the usefulness of AssetPlus in formulating intervention plans.....45
3.6. Features of AssetPlus that supported intervention planning.....46
3.7. Concerns about the usefulness of AssetPlus for developing intervention plans 47
3.8. Most interviewees reported their YOT had created alternative intervention plans.....49

4. How AssetPlus is being used in developing pre-sentence reports 51
4.1. AssetPlus was used in a variety of ways by practitioners writing PSRs 51
4.2. Practitioners reported challenges in using AssetPlus to develop PSRs.....53
4.3. The majority of survey respondents felt that AssetPlus was not time-efficient for writing PSRs.....54

5. The impact of AssetPlus upon YOT communication with the secure estate 55
5.1. There were considerable challenges in sharing AssetPlus with the secure estate 56
5.2. Use of AssetPlus while a child is in custody 58
5.3. The impression is one of limited joint working on assessments between the secure estate and YOTs59

6. The impact of AssetPlus on broader outcomes (including FTEs, reoffending, remands into custody and other outcomes) 60
6.1. Most respondents did not consider that AssetPlus had an impact on reoffending.....60
6.2. AssetPlus is not thought to affect rates of remand into custody.....61

7. Conclusions.....62
References 65

Figures

Figure 1: Schematic of AssetPlus framework used by the Youth Justice Board 7

Figure 2: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: Overall, in my experience, AssetPlus is easy to navigate as a tool (practitioners' response) 23

Figure 3: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: Overall, in my experience, AssetPlus is easy to navigate as a tool (practitioners' response, disaggregated by IT system) 24

Figure 4: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: AssetPlus allows space for me to use my professional judgement when making assessments (practitioners' responses) 32

Figure 5: Based on your professional experience, please rate how much you agree with the following statement: Using AssetPlus helps me to make good quality assessments (practitioners' response) 35

Figure 6: Thinking about your team, how far do you agree with the following statements about AssetPlus: Using AssetPlus helps my team to make good quality assessments (managers' response) 36

Figure 7: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: The AssetPlus framework allows me to include all the relevant information I need to make an assessment of a child's need (practitioners' response) 37

Figure 8: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I use the features of the tool (e.g. graphs, timelines) in order to identify patterns in a child's life (practitioners' response) 38

Figure 9: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I use the features of the tool (e.g. graphs, timelines) in order to identify patterns in a child's life (practitioners' response, disaggregated by IT system) 39

Figure 10: Based on your professional experience, please rate how much you agree with the following statement: AssetPlus helps me to make useful intervention plans for children who are at risk of offending (practitioners' response) 46

Figure 11: Practitioners' response to survey question about effect of AssetPlus on quality of interventions and services provided to children 48

Figure 12: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I use AssetPlus for writing pre-sentence reports (practitioners' response) 52

Figure 13: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I find AssetPlus time-efficient for writing pre-sentence reports (practitioners' response) 54

Figure 14: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I find AssetPlus time-efficient for youth custody placements (practitioners' response) 58

Figure 15: In your view, what is the impact of AssetPlus on the remand in custody of children? (practitioners' and managers' response)..... 61

Tables

Table 1: Key elements of AssetPlus 9

Table 2: Practitioner survey respondents' opinions on the time efficiency of AssetPlus for various purposes 20

Table 3: Survey respondents' feedback on whether they felt they had sufficient training on different aspects of AssetPlus 44

Table 4: Practitioners' response to survey questions on the usefulness of AssetPlus in developing intervention plans for children at risk of causing or receiving harm 46

Boxes

Box 1: Alternative YOT approaches to prevention and OOCD cases 28

Abbreviations

CMS	Case Management System
FTE	First-time entrant
HMIP	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation
OOCD	Out of Court Disposal
PDF	Portable Document Format
p-NOMIS	Prison National Offender Management System
PSR	Pre-Sentence Report
RMP	Risk Management Plan
ROSH	Risk of Serious Harm
SCH	Secure Children's Home
SE	Secure Estate
STC	Secure Training Centre
VMP	Vulnerability Management Plan
YC	Youth Caution
YCC	Youth Conditional Caution
YJAF	Youth Justice Application Framework
YJB	Youth Justice Board
YOGRS	Youth Offender Group Reconviction Scale
YOT	Youth Offending Team
YOI	Young Offender Institution

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank Lucy Strang and Gillian Kelly for research assistance. In addition, we are very grateful to Dr Emma Disley for invaluable inputs and guidance as the continual quality-assurance reviewer for this report, and to our external quality-assurance reviewer. We would also like to thank all interviewees for their willingness to take part in interviews and contribute to this research.

On this project, RAND Europe collaborated with Dr Kerry Baker, an independent expert and consultant in youth justice, who previously worked extensively with the Youth Justice Board in developing AssetPlus (and its predecessor, Asset). The research team took a number of steps to carefully manage a potential conflict of interest, including by ensuring that researchers from RAND Europe led on data analysis and quality assurance.

This study was produced by an independent research team and its conclusions may not reflect the views of the Youth Justice Board.

Executive Summary

RAND Europe was commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) to carry out a research study to explore the experiences and perceptions of AssetPlus in youth justice practitioners working in Youth Offending Teams (YOTs). This document is the final report of this research study.

Background

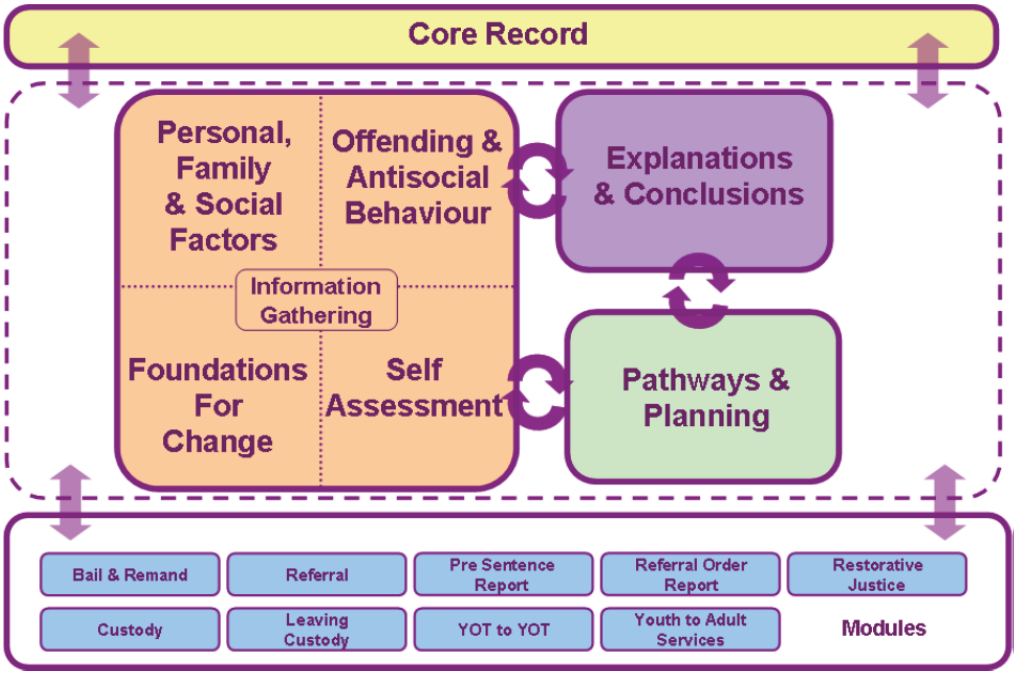
AssetPlus is an integrated assessment and planning framework used across YOTs and the youth secure estate in England and Wales.[1] It was rolled out in YOTs between 2015 and 2017 and in secure establishments during 2018. It is intended to assist practitioners in making high quality assessments of children (aged 10–17) in the youth justice system, and in creating individualised plans that address children's offending behaviour and help them to move towards living a safe and crime-free life.

The YJB introduced AssetPlus in order to replace the previous framework (Asset) and a number of other separate tools that were previously in use across the youth justice system.

The AssetPlus framework

The diagram below summarises the AssetPlus model.

[1] The youth secure estate includes Secure Children's Homes (SCHs), Secure Training Centres (STCs) and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs).



Practitioners use the Information Gathering section to record details – both positive factors and problems – about different aspects of a child's life. The Explanations and Conclusions section provides a place to analyse the interconnections between these different factors to help understand patterns of behaviour over time and to make judgements about possible future outcomes. This analysis should then be used to inform the development of a personalised intervention plan, which aims to build on the strengths in a child's life and promote desistance from offending. The modules relate to specific processes that happen at certain points during a child's involvement with the youth justice system, and are used when relevant for each particular case.[2]

Compared to the previous Asset framework, AssetPlus was designed to have a much stronger focus on strengths, protective factors and pathways to desistance from offending. It was intended to be used flexibly in a way that allows practitioners to vary the amount and detail of information recorded, depending on the complexity of each individual case. It should operate as an end-to-end framework and provide a joined-up assessment process for children moving between community and custodial settings.[3]

The introduction of AssetPlus was intended to lead to:

- Improved quality of assessment and intervention plans;
- More individualised approaches;
- A more dynamic, iterative and ongoing assessment process;
- Reduced likelihood of safeguarding incidents;
- Greater confidence in the youth justice system and its assessment processes;

[2] Youth Justice Board (YJB). 2014a. *AssetPlus Model Document*. London: Youth Justice Board; Youth Justice Board (YJB). 2014b. *AssetPlus Rationale Document*. London: Youth Justice Board.

[3] YJB 2014a.

- Improved data sharing between YOTs and the secure estate;[4]
- Improved operational efficiencies and quality of pre-sentence reports (reports prepared by the YOT practitioner to inform the court about the most suitable sentencing option for a child).[5]

There are four commercial case management systems (CMS) that incorporate AssetPlus. YOTs are able to choose (and contract with) their preferred supplier independently of the YJB. For the secure estate, the YJB commissioned the development of the YJAF (Youth Justice Assessment Framework) system, which enables staff in secure establishments to read and update AssetPlus.

Research approach

The study aimed to address the following questions, posed by the YJB:

- How, if at all, has the delivery of AssetPlus changed working practices in YOTs, roles and responsibilities of practitioners?
- How, if at all, has AssetPlus affected operational efficiencies?
- How, if at all, has AssetPlus affected the quality of assessment?
- How, if at all, has AssetPlus affected the quality of intervention plans?
- How has AssetPlus been used in Pre-Sentence Reports?
- How has the implementation and delivery of AssetPlus impacted transitions from the SE to the community?
- How has AssetPlus affected first-time entrants (FTE), re/offending, remands in custody, and other outcomes for children?

The research team carried out three main data collection activities to address these research questions. These were:

- A review of documents and materials about AssetPlus provided by the YJB and identified by the research team in a targeted search.
- Semi-structured interviews with 57 youth justice practitioners working in a sample of 10 YOTs across England and Wales.
- An online survey issued to all YOTs and completed by 364 managers and practitioners from 77 YOTs.

The strength of this study's approach is that it captures the expert and practical knowledge of those using AssetPlus in their daily work. However, the scope of the study has not allowed us to gather less subjective

[4] Youth Justice Board (YJB). 2013a. *Assessment and Planning Interventions: Review and Redesign Project Full Business Case*. London: Youth Justice Board; YJB, 2014a.

[5] Youth Justice Board (YJB). 2016. *AssetPlus Guidance*. London: Youth Justice Board

information against which to test and compare practitioners' perceptions of the impact of AssetPlus. In addition, we have no systematic way of comparing to the old Asset framework as a benchmark.

Issues with case management systems (referred to as 'IT systems' throughout the main report) were not within the scope of this study. However, separating them from practitioners' perceptions of and experiences with AssetPlus proved very difficult, thus they are reported when integral to the way in which practitioners interacted with the tool.

While included in a research question, this study did not in fact include the collection of data relating to the impact of AssetPlus on rates of reoffending, remands into custody or first-time entrants into the youth justice system. A separate outcomes evaluation, commissioned by the YJB, will allow more insight into this area.

Main cross-cutting findings

In general, practitioners liked the ideas underpinning AssetPlus, but felt that the potential benefits were not being fully realised at present. Practitioners were positive about features such as the focus on strengths, desistance and the use of professional judgement in AssetPlus. However, they identified a range of factors preventing the full potential of benefits from being realised across all areas relating to the research questions, including: elements of the way in which the framework was designed, the need for additional training for those using the tool, misunderstandings about how to use some components of AssetPlus and problems with the way in which the framework was implemented in IT case-management systems.

In terms of operational efficiencies, the time needed to complete AssetPlus was not always proportionate to the risk and need of a case. As a large and comprehensive assessment that requires a lot of detailed information, AssetPlus was considered time-consuming but worthwhile when used for more complex and serious cases. However, practitioners appear to struggle to adapt AssetPlus for cases where children would have little contact with the YOT. In addition, processes followed in some YOTs required managerial oversight for all assessments and comprehensive reviews (rather than quick updates). Such processes may also add to the perception that AssetPlus is overly time-consuming.

Some practitioners encountered difficulties navigating AssetPlus. Practitioners reported that the non-linear nature of the tool – intended to give practitioners flexibility to adapt the assessment process to the circumstances of each individual child – could, in practice, be confusing. Additionally, the language used in the tool (describing the information required in each section) was not always clear. These issues may contribute to the belief that the tool resulted in duplication, with the same information inputted at different places. There was some confusion about the difference between description and analysis, and how these are recorded in AssetPlus, which also contributed to a perception that the framework was repetitive, with a subsequent effect on perceptions of the impact of AssetPlus on the quality of assessment and operational efficiencies. In addition, the way in which the framework appeared and operated on IT case management systems could also be unhelpful: information did not always pull through, interfaces were not always user-friendly and navigation between sections could be laborious.

As a result, many practitioners reported that AssetPlus had had an impact on their working practices, roles and responsibilities by adding to their workload, with the consequence that some felt that they had less time to work face-to-face with children.

Practitioners identified both positive and negative effects on the quality of their assessments and intervention plans. The framework prompted and encouraged the inclusion of detailed, high quality and relevant information, a focus on a child's strengths and pathways to desistance, and good analysis and precision when considering potential risks and future outcomes. All these features were considered to aid high quality assessments and intervention plans.

However, other features could have a negative effect on the quality of assessments: the number of boxes and tick-boxes within the interface of the tool, its size and length, occasional lapses in clarity and specificity, and lack of user- and child-friendliness. These features overlap considerably with the features that were reported to make AssetPlus a time-consuming tool.

User- and child-unfriendliness were particularly noticed in the intervention planning section, and led several YOTs to develop alternatives that they used instead of, or in parallel to, AssetPlus when making plans for children's interventions.

Considerable variation remains in how and when AssetPlus is used to develop pre-sentence reports. Practitioners expressed different views on the extent to which AssetPlus influenced their PSRs. Some stated that they developed their PSRs independently of, or prior to, AssetPlus assessments, due to reported time pressures and the need to produce reports to meet court deadlines. Others, however, reported using information from AssetPlus during the writing process or using the specific PSR module within the AssetPlus framework. Interviewees considered that using reports generated by the PSR module in AssetPlus was not always helpful, because it did not produce reports with sufficient high quality and relevant information, and did not match the writing style and purpose that practitioners felt such reports needed. As a result, PSRs generated using AssetPlus needed substantial editing and some practitioners reported that their YOT had developed their own templates for use instead.

Joint working on assessment and planning between YOTs and the secure estate was problematic. Difficulties in connectivity hampered both the sending of AssetPlus to staff in a secure establishment upon a child's entry into custody, and the editing of an AssetPlus for a child in custody. At the time of writing, Phase III of YJAF implementation has not yet been completed: this is intended to bring about greater connectivity between YOTs and the secure estate from autumn 2019 onwards.

Interviews suggested some confusion around the roles and responsibilities of YOT practitioners and staff in a secure establishment in relation to AssetPlus. Some practitioners reported that, in their experience, staff in the secure estate did not always complete AssetPlus assessments or plans, or completed them to a low standard. However, it should be noted that our research did not involve any secure-estate staff.

In summary, across all research questions, key areas for improvement remain in order to ensure that the potential benefits of the strengths-based holistic assessment are realised. These include improving the user interface, facilitating the easier sharing of information between professionals, and providing additional training to enhance practitioners' analysis skills and understanding of how to avoid duplication and ensure proportionate use of the AssetPlus framework.

1. Introduction

AssetPlus is an integrated assessment and planning framework used across Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and the youth secure estate in England and Wales. It is intended to assist practitioners in making high-quality assessments of children (aged 10–17) in the youth justice system and in creating individualised plans that address children's offending behaviour and help them to move towards living a safe and crime-free life.

AssetPlus was implemented in a phased approach between September 2015 and November 2017 in YOTs, and introduced in the secure estate during the first half of 2018. It replaced the 'Asset' assessment framework, which had been in use since 2000.

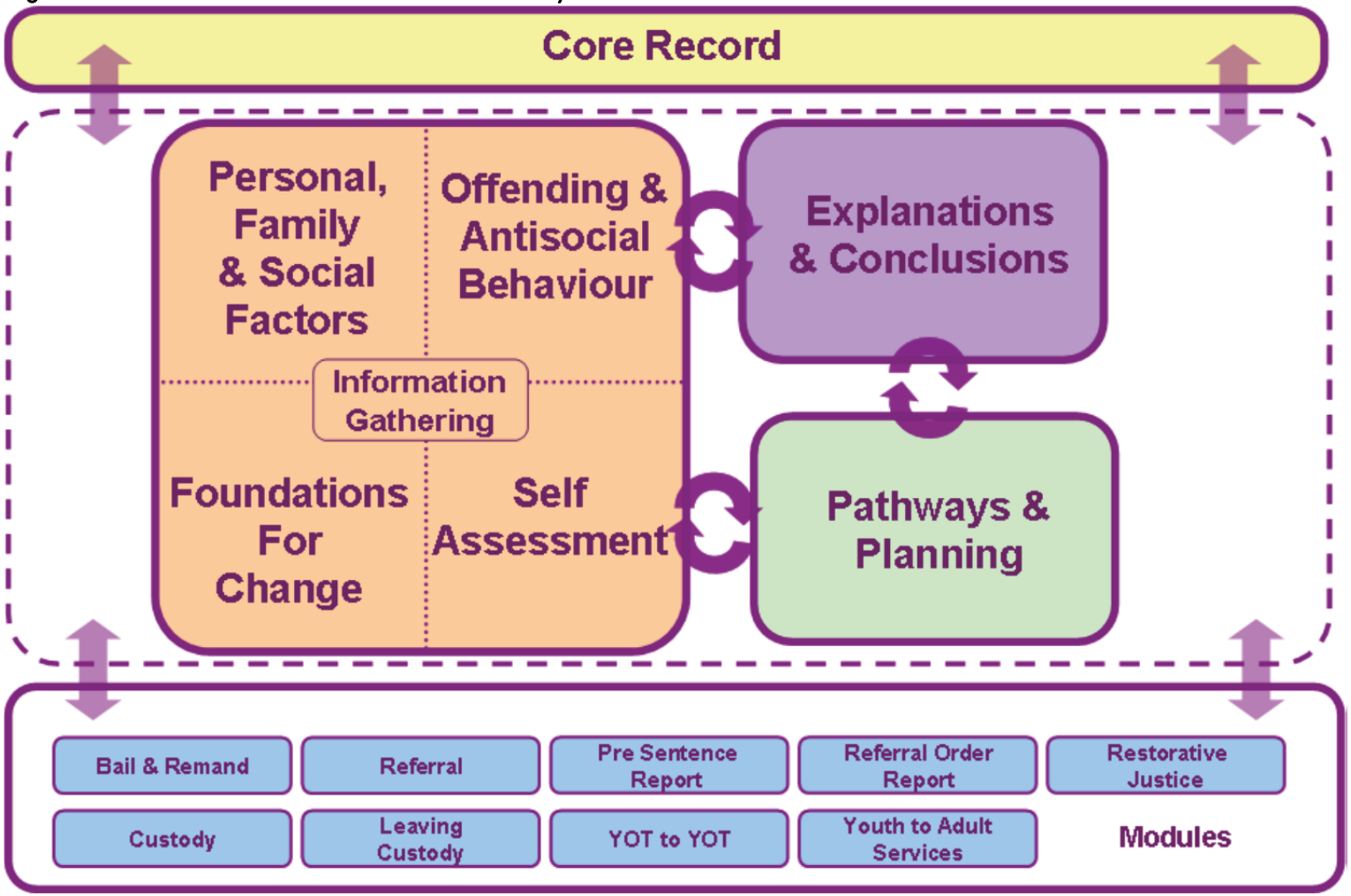
This document is the final report of a research study, commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (YJB), to explore the experiences and perceptions of youth justice practitioners working in YOTs regarding AssetPlus.[6]

1.1. AssetPlus and the reasons for its introduction

Figure 1 shows the core components of AssetPlus (YJB, 2014a).

[6] In this report, the term 'practitioner' should be understood as referring to all employees working in a Youth Offending Team (YOT), rather than simply those holding a caseload, unless accompanied by a discussion of 'managers' as well.

Figure 1: Schematic of AssetPlus framework used by the Youth Justice Board



Source: Youth Justice Board

The AssetPlus model was based on four key elements in the assessment and planning process (Baker et al. 2011, YJB 2014a):

- Collecting and recording relevant information;
- Analysing and understanding information (e.g. explaining why a child committed this offence at this time or explaining how a child was able to desist from offending for a period);
- Making judgements (e.g. about possible future behaviour, potential risks to a child's safety, or the significance of different strengths and positive factors in a child's life);
- Making decisions (e.g. about what action to take).

Table 1 illustrates how and where each of these components is incorporated within AssetPlus.

In addition, administrative elements of the assessment and planning process are supported in AssetPlus through the Core Record, which contains essential biographical and demographic information about a child.

AssetPlus also contains modules that relate to specific processes (including Bail and Remand, Reports, transitions to custody, transitions between YOTs or to adult services, referrals to restorative justice and referrals to other agencies) that happen at certain points during a child's involvement with the youth justice system. These are used only when relevant for each particular case. These modules are designed to reduce the unnecessary duplication of information collection and reporting, by 'pulling through' information that has already been entered in other sections of the AssetPlus tool.

Table 1: Key elements of AssetPlus

Element of the assessment and planning process	**Relevant section within AssetPlus**	**How this section should be completed and the information that should be recorded there**
Collecting and recording relevant information	Information Gathering	Intended to facilitate the gathering of information about a wide range of factors – both positive and negative – in a child's life. Information recorded here should generally be factual and descriptive.
Analysing and understanding information (e.g. explaining why a child committed this offence at this time)	Explanations and Conclusions	Practitioners are encouraged to draw together all the different pieces of information from the Information Gathering section and look at them holistically. For example, practitioners will assess the strength and significance of the different desistance factors that have been noted through the assessment process. This section also includes questions to prompt consideration of how the *interaction* between a child and their environment has affected both the child's offending behaviour and periods of desistance from offending.
Making judgements (e.g. about possible future behaviour or potential risks to a child's safety)	Explanations and Conclusions	Practitioners are required to test hypotheses and make judgements about likely future events in relation to the child's own safety and well-being, their likelihood of reoffending, and the risk of serious harm that the child poses others. These judgements are made through a series of questions that require practitioners to identify the possible impact, likelihood and imminence of potentially problematic future events.
Making decisions (e.g. about what action to take)	Pathways and Planning	This is the place where practitioners record an action plan, set targets and identify what needs to be done in order to achieve the goals of helping the child desist from offending, build and develop strengths, and make a positive contribution to society.

AssetPlus was designed to improve assessment and planning, leading to better outcomes for children

Important features of AssetPlus compared to the former Asset (YJB 2014a, 2014b) are presented below:

- A greater focus on pathways to desistance from offending, including the Good Lives Model.[7]
- A greater emphasis on a child's strengths and protective factors.
- A clearer distinction between the identification of need and the likelihood of reoffending.
- More attention given to children's and parents' views.
- Greater clarity in risk assessments (by specifying impact, likelihood, imminence).
- Inclusion of questions on new topics (including on speech, language and communication needs, and gang membership).
- The use of 'further exploration' questions to be used at practitioners' discretion, depending on the level of complexity of each individual case.
- The use of a variety of ratings and measures (rather than just one score, as in Asset) and an approach that encourages comparison of actuarial and clinical measures (Ansbro 2010).

The YJB identified a number of potential benefits from the introduction of AssetPlus (YJB 2013, YJB 2014a). These included:

- Improved quality of assessment.
- Improved quality of intervention plans, with a stronger focus on outcomes.
- More individualised approaches, for example, 'AssetPlus will help YOTs to personalise desistance support for children and young people' (HMIP 2016, 4).
- A more dynamic, iterative and ongoing assessment process leading to a 'Reduction in the burden caused by the number of reviews required for individual cases' (YJB 2013a, 38).
- Improved data sharing between the community and the secure estate.
- Reduced likelihood of safeguarding and public protection incidents.
- Greater confidence in the youth justice system and its assessment processes.

The development and introduction of AssetPlus was intended to address a number of drivers for change: new research evidence about desistance from offending and the potential benefits of strengths-based approaches to working with children;[8] changes in patterns of offending behaviour amongst children; and the need for a single system that would work between the YOTs and the secure estate (YJB 2014a).

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[7] The Good Lives Model approach to offender rehabilitation is built on the idea that it is necessary to build capabilities and strengths in people in order to reduce their risk of reoffending (Ward and Maruna 2007).

[8] Strengths-based approaches (of which the Good Lives Model is one example) focus on helping people make positive changes, develop skills and build resilience, in contrast to predominantly risk-based models, which focus primarily on addressing problematic aspects of a child's life.

AssetPlus was designed to bring together several separate tools previously in use across the youth justice system, including Onset (used for preventative work), final warning Asset, bail Asset, risk and vulnerability management plans, and the additional assessments and forms that were required when a child entered custody. In addition, AssetPlus was also intended to be an assessment process that could be used throughout a child's time in the youth justice system, avoiding the problem of the former Asset system where a new assessment had to be started for each court appearance or order. The YJB hoped that the new framework would generate a comprehensive body of information and analysis that could easily be updated when new information came to light, and facilitate communication between all parties in the youth justice sector and with partner agencies in social care and community safety (YJB 2013a).

In identifying these desired features and intended benefits, the YJB worked with practitioners, academics and IT providers to design, develop and test AssetPlus (YJB 2014a).

YOTs can choose between four commercially operated IT systems that run AssetPlus

At the time when research was conducted, YOTs could choose between one of four case management systems (CMS) that incorporate AssetPlus: CACI, Capita, Careworks, and Servelec.[9] The YJB specified the requirements that each system must meet and approved their implementation. The layout of the tool is the same across all four systems, but they differ in terms of how each integrates AssetPlus within their wider case-management functionality. Each YOT chooses its preferred system and contracts directly with the supplier.

For the secure estate, the YJB commissioned the IT service provider i2N to provide a service that could both replace the existing 'eAsset' Case Management tool and support the AssetPlus Framework. After a period requirement discovery (during which the system requirements were identified), the Youth Justice Application Framework (YJAF) was developed. YJAF provides Youth Custody Services Placements functionality to manage the process of placing children in custody, and is the means by which members of staff in the secure estate are able to both read and create AssetPlus assessments and plans. YOTs currently have access to the secure estate AssetPlus information on a read-only basis through YJAF, but will ultimately receive the complete AssetPlus information into their YOT CMS once Phase III of YJAF implementation is completed.

In this report, Case Management Systems are referred to as 'IT systems' throughout.

1.2. Implementation of AssetPlus

AssetPlus was rolled out in all YOTs over a two-year period between September 2015 and November 2017, and across the secure estate in the first half of 2018.

[9] Since research was conducted, additional providers have entered the market, providing CMS that also incorporate AssetPlus.

Training and support from the YJB

Business change support and training was provided to all YOTs by the YJB during implementation. This took the form of regular contact with a Business Change Adviser, post go-live support, a five-day 'Train the Trainer' programme and additional, optional refresher training. The 'Train the Trainer' programme covered both the new theoretical concepts in the framework and how to navigate the new IT systems. Members of staff who attended this training then delivered the same training to practitioners in their own YOTs through a cascade model. All practitioners were also expected to complete a foundational online module before attending their local training sessions.[10] The YJB made additional resources available online to all YOTs before, during and after deployment of AssetPlus. Some YOTs also organised additional top-up training, at their own cost, on specific aspects of AssetPlus at a later stage.

Current implementation picture and elements still to be rolled out

At the time of writing, nearly all YOTs and all parts of the secure estate are using AssetPlus.[11]

However, there is not yet full connectivity between YOTs and the secure estate, which means that the goal of having a single assessment and plan for a child that follows them through the youth justice system – regardless of the point they enter the system or whether they receive a community or custodial outcome – has not yet been achieved. Nevertheless, Phase III of YJAF implementation, which will enable a direct connection between YOTs and the secure estate, is due to take place in autumn 2019 and is intended to facilitate the sharing of information between the secure estate and YOTs.

Updated national standards

In order to ensure good outcomes for children in the youth justice system, the government sets national standards that define the minimum expectation for all agencies that provide statutory services. Recent changes in the national standards have affected some of the findings in this report, so are summarised here.

Until 1 April 2019, the *National Standards for Youth Justice Services* (YJB 2013b) were in force.[12] Under these national standards, practitioners were required to undertake an assessment of a child with an out of court disposal order within ten days of referral by using the 'YJB-approved assessment tool'. In addition, all plans had to be completed 15 days after beginning an assessment. All AssetPlus assessments also had to be reviewed at least every six months, or whenever changes in the child's life were so significant as to require changes to the plan.

The *Standards for children in the youth justice system* (YJB 2019a) were published in February 2019 and took effect from 1 April 2019.[13] These standards require that YOTs undertake a 'timely and accurate,

[10] There is, however, no data available on the proportion of staff who actually completed this online module.

[11] A small number of YOTs have been given permission to trial alternative models as part of the Partners in Practice programme (https://innovationcsc.co.uk/partners-in-practice/) funded by the Department for Education.

[12] Referred to as 'the 2013 national standards' throughout this report.

[13] Referred to as 'the 2019 national standards' throughout this report.

suitable and sufficient assessment' of children with out of court disposals. No precise timescales are set around assessments, plans and reviews, but rather it is specified that assessment should be 'ongoing and dynamic'. Since the interviews and survey took place at a time when the 2019 national standards were not yet in effect or only very newly introduced, discussion in this report tends to reflect practitioners' perceptions and experiences of the previous timescales and requirements required under the 2013 national standards.

Existing evidence relating to AssetPlus

Although there is little academic or external research on AssetPlus, some evidence of YOT practitioners' perceptions and experiences of AssetPlus is already available from HMIP inspection reports and internal evaluations of sector feedback.

Earlier research suggested that practitioners' initial reactions to the ideas and theory behind AssetPlus were positive – especially its emphasis on professional judgement and desistance factors, its holistic nature and the level of detail required (YJB 2019b; HMIP 2017). However, HMIP inspection reports highlighted concerns amongst practitioners about the usefulness of the intervention-planning parts of AssetPlus, how long completing an AssetPlus assessment took and the suitability of the assessment for early intervention cases (HMIP 2017). In addition, early feedback from practitioners referred to difficulties implementing the IT systems that were exacerbated by the number of IT system suppliers (for example, by making it more difficult for YOTs to collectively discuss technical issues, share solutions and negotiate with suppliers when they are using different CMS). These difficulties had an impact on practitioners' confidence in, and general motivation towards, using the AssetPlus framework (YJB 2019b, 3).

Previous feedback from practitioners also indicated a need for additional training on AssetPlus post-implementation (YJB 2019b, 4). In particular, further training on what makes a good assessment (YJB 2019b, 4), the terminology used regarding risk and desistance (YJB 2019b, 3), and identifying positive factors in children's lives (Hampson 2017) were identified as potentially beneficial.

1.3. Research questions, study approach and limitations

This research, commissioned by the YJB in 2018, is an independent study into practitioners' experiences and perceptions of AssetPlus.

Research questions

The study aimed to address the following questions, posed by the YJB:

1. How, if at all, has the delivery of AssetPlus changed working practices in YOTs, roles and responsibilities of practitioners?
2. How, if at all, has AssetPlus affected operational efficiencies?
3. How, if at all, has AssetPlus affected the quality of assessment?
4. How, if at all, has AssetPlus affected the quality of intervention plans?
5. How has AssetPlus been used in Pre-Sentence Reports?
6. How has the implementation and delivery of AssetPlus impacted transitions from the SE to the community?

7. How has AssetPlus affected FTEs, re/offending, remands in custody, and other outcomes for children?

Data collection

To address these questions, three main data collection activities were undertaken:

- A review of documents and materials about AssetPlus, some of which were provided by the YJB, and others which were identified by the research team in a targeted search.
- Semi-structured interviews with 57 managers, support staff and practitioners working in ten YOTs across England and Wales between 28 January and 14 March 2019.
- An online survey issued to all YOTs in England and Wales and completed by 364 managers and practitioners from 77 YOTs between 18 March and 5 April 2019.

In addition, a small number of scoping interviews were carried out prior to the interviews at YOTs, in order to find out more about the implementation of AssetPlus and any existing issues and challenges that had been noticed. Further details of the data collection methods are provided in Annex D.

Data analysis

Answers to the research questions were formulated following the thematic analysis of qualitative data from interviews and open-text survey responses (i.e. where respondents wrote their own answers), and descriptive, statistical analysis of quantitative data from the closed-text survey responses (i.e. where respondents chose from a limited range of response options).

Throughout the report, an 'interviewee' should be understood as an individual who took part in a semi-structured interview and a 'respondent' should be understood as an individual who responded to the online survey issued to all YOTs.

During qualitative data analysis, in order to identify key themes, areas of consensus, and areas of divergence, the research team considered all relevant points raised by interviewees. Interviews were semi-structured and topics of conversation varied considerably between interviewees, often depending on their individual role and personal experience. As a result, we cannot estimate or assume the views of those who did not discuss a particular topic. While we recognise the importance of keeping the frequency of responses in mind, we have also considered points raised by a smaller number of interviewees, when we consider these to be relevant to broader themes.

When reporting interview analysis, we have used language that indicates the frequency with which a view was expressed. In total, 57 interviews took place. When 50 or more interviewees are cited, we have referred to this as 'nearly all'. When between 36 and 49 interviewees are cited, we have referred to this as over half or approximately two-thirds (depending on the exact figure). When a point was raised by between 25 and 35 interviewees, we have referred to this as approximately half (depending on the exact figure). When a point was raised by between 15 and 24 interviewees, we have referred to this as approximately one third (depending on the exact figure). When fewer than 15 interviewees mentioned a point, we have referred to this using language such as 'some', 'several' and 'a few'). Each point identified in our analysis is referenced with the number of interviewees who expressed such a view, and the number

of YOTs that they represented. When there was a clear difference in the views expressed by manager and practitioner interviewees, this has also been noted in the analysis.

Data from open-text questions in the survey yielded additional qualitative data. Footnotes indicate when data from open-text questions is relevant to the overall point, and includes information such as: the text of the survey question, the number of respondents who made the point, and the total number of responses for that question.

We carried out a descriptive analysis of the quantitative (closed-text) survey responses, looking at the numbers of respondents expressing different views per question. Our analysis of the data from the survey disaggregated the responses by both the IT system used by the respondents' YOT, and by the respondent's role, but this is included in the report only when responses differed notably between role or IT system. Differences have been reported using the following language: when there is a difference of less than 15 percentage points, this has been described as a small or slight difference; differences between 15 and 25 percentage points have been described as a moderate difference; those of over 25 percentage points have been described as a substantial difference. Where analysis revealed differences in specific experiences and perceptions related to using AssetPlus between survey respondents and interviewees, this has been noted and, where possible, reasons why this may be the case have been considered.

More complex statistical analysis or statistical testing was not appropriate due to the nature of the survey data, and was not undertaken.

Limitations and scope

A perception-based study: The aim of this study is to capture practitioners' perceptions in relation to the research questions. The strength of this approach is that it harnesses their expert practical knowledge and allows the study to explore complexity in how the use and experiences of AssetPlus is influenced by local context and culture. The limitation is that the study is not always able to gather less subjective information against which to test and compare these perceptions.

***No systematic comparisons to the old Asset framework*:** The research questions for this study imply a comparative element between AssetPlus and a former system (in this case, the Asset framework). However, many practitioners had never experienced the previous Asset model and could not compare the two. As such, the interview protocol and survey instrument focused on current practice and use of AssetPlus, with optional comparative questions that could be completed by practitioners who had used the previous Asset framework.

***IT issues were not in the scope of the study, but separating them from perceptions of AssetPlus was difficult*:** Issues experienced by practitioners as a result of IT systems' implementation of AssetPlus have been recognised in prior evaluations. The YJB asked that this study focused on the theory and approach underlying AssetPlus, and the research team developed research tools in response.[14] However, it

[14] At interviews, interviewers explained the purpose of the evaluation to interviewees, acknowledged existing IT problems and prompted them to consider the framework beyond navigational difficulties. In the survey, respondents

proved difficult in practice to separate issues that were only about the functionality and implementation of the IT systems from practitioners' general perceptions and experiences of using AssetPlus. Disaggregation of survey responses by IT system has only been referred to in the report when the research team felt that there was considerable and significant variation in survey responses between IT systems. However, the small sample sizes mean that further analysis of differences between IT systems is not possible (as well as outside the scope).

Survey respondents may not be representative: The survey was distributed to all 152 YOTs in England and Wales. Complete responses were received from 364 respondents, including 89 who identified as managers and 275 who identified as practitioners.[15] At least one complete response was received from 77 YOTs. As no statistical testing was conducted, comparisons between groups should be seen as indicative only. However, it is possible that those who chose to respond to the survey may not be representative of all YOT staff (for example, they may have been those most dissatisfied or positive about AssetPlus). Furthermore, although reminders were used, the research team are not able to ascertain whether all YOT managers were able to pass the survey on as requested.

YOTs participating in interviews may not be representative: The research team developed a sampling framework to select ten YOTs in which interviews would be conducted. Of the ten YOTs initially approached, five did not respond or declined to take part. Five alternatives – who were selected using the sampling framework – were approached, and all agreed to participate (see Annex D for more information on these YOTs' characteristics). Two of the YOTs that initially declined to take part cited limited resources, raising the possibility that those who did agree had more resources available than other YOTs nationally.[16] As with the survey respondents, it is possible that YOTs whose management had strong opinions on AssetPlus or were more open to participating in research would be more likely to agree to take part than other YOTs nationally. In addition, a manager or senior practitioner from each participating YOT was responsible for selecting interviewees from within their team (following some guidelines from the research team about the range of roles interviewees should encompass), introducing a risk of selection bias. However, our analysis of the interview data suggests that there was a variety of opinions and responses about AssetPlus and its perceived impacts across and within YOTs.

There was little data gained about the impact of AssetPlus on reoffending and other outcomes: Research questions 5 and 6 ask about the impact of AssetPlus on FTEs, reoffending, remands into custody and other outcomes. The YJB has commissioned a separate study in the form of an outcome evaluation, which will also address these questions. In the current study, interviewees were invited to

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were asked first about their experiences of navigation and then about their opinions of the tool in terms of the content to be entered.

[15] Survey respondents who identified as managers were asked to complete a different version of the survey, with far fewer questions pertaining to their responsibilities and overview of their team's activities.

[16] If a YOT agreed to be an interview site, this involved some additional workload for them: managers were asked to put together a list of interviewees and to host an interviewer for one or two days, while interviewees were asked to give up an hour of their time during working hours.

comment on the longer term impacts of AssetPlus, but generally this is an issue on which they were not able to respond.

We did not consult with staff from the secure estate: while findings from chapter 5 relate to perceptions about the impact of AssetPlus on communication with the secure estate, we have not carried out any research involving the perceptions or experiences of staff from secure establishments themselves (because such activities were outside the scope of the evaluation). Therefore it should be kept in mind that conclusions in chapter 5 are based solely on the perceptions of YOT practitioners, and may therefore be limited in their usefulness.

1.4. Structure of the report

This report is structured as follows:

1. Introduction
2. The perceived impact of AssetPlus on working practices and operational efficiencies (covering RQ1 and 2)
3. The perceived impact of AssetPlus on the quality of assessments and intervention plans (covering RQ3 and 4)
4. How AssetPlus is being used in developing pre-sentence reports (covering RQ5)
5. The impact of AssetPlus on communication with the secure estate (covering RQ6)
6. The impact of AssetPlus on broader outcomes (including FTEs, reoffending, remands into custody and other outcomes) (covering RQ7)
7. Conclusions

2. The perceived impact of AssetPlus on working practices, roles and responsibilities, and operational efficiencies

Key findings

- Practitioners and managers reported that, compared to the former Asset, AssetPlus had added to their workload. Many reported that it was not a time-efficient tool.
- AssetPlus was perceived to be time-consuming to use because of its length, the level of detail of information required, perceived repetition (where the same kinds of information were requested in different sections), its non-linear nature and reported difficulties in navigation.
    - However, as explored further in section 3, practitioners could see the value in the information collected and did not make many suggestions for improvements.
- Some contextual circumstances may also contribute to perceptions of AssetPlus as time-consuming:
    - AssetPlus was particularly time-consuming when used in cases where children would have little intervention with the YOT.
    - AssetPlus was seen as particularly onerous in YOTs with high caseloads.
    - How YOTs and practitioners are interpreting requirements to use and countersign AssetPlus in some situations may be adding to practitioners' workload.
- As a result of the additional workload, some practitioners reported that they had less time to spend working with children and that they had reorganised their working schedules.
- Other perceived effects on roles, responsibilities and working practices include:
    - There was little consensus on whether AssetPlus facilitated multi-agency working, although a few felt that an AssetPlus assessment was too large to share easily.
    - The majority of practitioners considered that AssetPlus enabled their use of professional judgement in making assessments.

AssetPlus was intended to create operational efficiencies by providing a single flexible, integrated assessment and intervention planning framework, which could be adapted and updated to reflect differences in case complexity for children at different points of contact within the youth justice system. It was intended that information need only be entered once and would be then 'pulled through' to other parts of the tool as required, thus saving time and reducing duplication.

AssetPlus was also designed to be a tool that encourages and requires the use of practitioners' professional judgement. It was intended to facilitate information-sharing and communication across services, particularly with children's services and with partner agencies in social care and the secure estate (YJB 2013a and 2014a).

This chapter addresses research questions 1 and 2. It presents findings about how, if at all, the implementation of AssetPlus has affected the day-to-day aspects of practitioners' work and roles and

responsibilities (in particular multi-agency working, use of professional judgement, and quality assurance of the assessments and plans in AssetPlus), and the extent to which AssetPlus has led to operational efficiencies.

2.1. Practitioners and managers reported that completing assessments using AssetPlus added to their workload

Nearly all interviewees reported that they found AssetPlus to be an assessment tool that took a considerable amount of time to use (50 interviewees; 10 YOTs). Survey respondents who reported having prior experience with the previous Asset framework were also asked whether using AssetPlus had affected their workload, and 91% (133/146) reported that their workload had increased.

Survey respondents said that, on average, completing an initial AssetPlus assessment took just under 12 hours – with 45% (122/275) indicating that it took them between five and ten hours (inclusive).

Interviewees sometimes provided estimates for how long it took to complete an initial assessment, providing a wide range of answers. Just under a third of all interviewees reported spending one to two days (15 interviewees; 7 YOTs) or nine or ten hours (4 interviewees; 2 YOTs). Others reported that an assessment might take five to six hours (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs) or two to three hours (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). Several practitioners reported that the time it took them (or members of their team) had reduced as they became more familiar with the tool (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

When they gave a specific time, interviewees reported that updating a review would take between two to four hours (5 interviewees; 4 YOTs). In comparison, in the survey, the mean response from respondents suggested that updating an AssetPlus assessment generally took longer, at just under five hours.

A number of managers reported that quality assuring and countersigning AssetPlus assessments had added considerably to their workload (11 interviewees; 5 YOTs). When provided, estimates for how long quality assuring an initial assessment took ranged from between 30 minutes and one hour (7 interviewees; 6 YOTs) to between one and four hours (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs). Similarly, 63% of survey respondents with countersigning responsibilities reported that quality assurance of one AssetPlus assessment took them between one and three hours (77/123), 20% reported taking less than an hour (25/123) and 15% reported spending over three hours (19/123) on a single assessment.

2.2. Some interviewees reported that they did not feel AssetPlus was a time-efficient framework

Of the interviewees who considered that AssetPlus took up a considerable amount of time, just over half also felt that AssetPlus was not, as a result, a time-efficient tool. Survey responses support this: when asked how far they agreed that AssetPlus allowed their team to carry out assessments in time-efficient ways, 81% (72/89) of managers who responded to the survey disagreed that this was the case, including 27% (33/89) who indicated that they strongly disagreed.

In addition, survey respondents were asked whether they found AssetPlus to be a time-efficient tool for a number of different functions, including: child's self-assessment, intervention planning, out of court disposals, prevention cases, youth custody placements, pre-sentence reports and other. Table 2 shows the proportion and number of respondents for each question who agreed and disagreed that this was the case. In two examples (youth custody placements and child's self-assessment), just over half of survey respondents reported that AssetPlus was time-efficient. In four examples (prevention cases, other, youth custody placements and child's self-assessment), just over half reported that AssetPlus was not a time-efficient tool for that particular task.

Table 2: Practitioner survey respondents' opinions on the time efficiency of AssetPlus for various purposes

Element of AssetPlus		Disagreed that AssetPlus was time efficient		Agreed that AssetPlus was time efficient		Neither agreed nor disagreed that AssetPlus was time efficient	
		%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
Out of court disposals	n=255	58%	148	22%	57	20%	50
Writing pre-sentence reports	n=218	56%	121	23%	49	22%	48
Intervention planning	n=267	50%	133	32%	86	18%	48
Prevention cases	n=275	46%	125	19%	51	22%	61
Other[17]	n=105	31%	33	45%	47	24%	25
Youth custody placements	n=235	26%	62	51%	120	23%	53
Child's self-assessment	n=268	25%	67	55%	148	20%	53

2.3. Features of AssetPlus that were considered to make it a time-consuming tool

The information collected provides insight into the aspects of the tool that were perceived to be time-consuming.

The amount of detailed information required by AssetPlus

Just under half of all interviewees reported that they considered the size of AssetPlus and the volume of information included to be a reason why it was a time-consuming tool (24 interviewees; 9 YOTs).

Of these, a few interviewees felt that AssetPlus simply required too much information to be entered (9 interviewees; 6 YOTs). As well as physically entering all the information, gathering information from

[17] Twenty respondents specified what was meant by 'other': 4 specified referral orders, 3 specified reviews, 3 specified OOCD or preventative cases and others entered other information that was not a recognisable option.

other agencies could also take a long time (5 interviewees; 5 YOTs).[18] Because a large amount of detailed personal information had to be sought from the child and their family, a small number felt that it directly affected their ability to build an initial relationship with the child (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Reasons for this included the perception that too many personal questions had to be asked at the beginning of a relationship with a child and family (1 interviewee), that the number of questions could be frustrating for the child (1 interviewee) and that questions meant that children were required to repeat information given to other services (1 interviewee). As AssetPlus was designed so that information could be collected over a period of time, rather than in one go at initial contact with the child, some of these problems may be the result of how AssetPlus was implemented, rather than a flaw of the tool itself.

Individuals offered few suggestions for how the information requested could be reduced. In fact, some survey respondents and interviewees suggested that additional information was needed: the inclusion of a category for child criminal exploitation (CCE), in addition to one for child sexual exploitation (CSE) that already existed (5 interviewees; 4 YOTs).[19] On the whole, as explored further in section 3.1, practitioners appeared to agree that the wider range of information required by AssetPlus may lead to more holistic assessment.

AssetPlus is perceived to request the same information in different places

Some interviewees and survey respondents reported that they found AssetPlus repetitive in terms of the information required in different sections, which led to duplication within assessments (8 interviewees; 5 YOTs).[20] Of these, a few recognised that this was due to practitioners' difficulties in understanding the question or requirements of each section, and reported that when understanding was improved, it was easier to avoid repetition (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). A small number of survey respondents indicated that further training had been valuable in ensuring that they avoided repetition and duplication of information.[21]

> 'I think some of the questions are very samey in the wording and that leads to people over recording. I think AssetPlus generally can lead to over recording. People […] particularly like to add historical information and they're used to adding or keeping historical information there from previous use of Asset. And I think that if you don't read the question really well, you can easily find yourself [thinking] "Well this is the third time I've answered this question", and it's not, they just haven't read the question correctly. And then it just feels frustrating […] So I think it's possibly just the wording of those […] questions that could have been more helpful.' [INT53, YOT9]

[18] Two interviewees particularly mentioned the Paris system, used for navigating the children's services' system, as time-consuming to navigate (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

[19] In response to an open-text question about further information that could be included in AssetPlus: 7 out of 117 survey responses to this question made this suggestion.

[20] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 30 out of 146 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

[21] In response to an open-text question at the end of the survey asking for any further views on AssetPlus: 5 out of 218 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

The sense that AssetPlus was repetitive may be connected to the fact that interviewees sometimes felt that the language used in AssetPlus was unclear (7 interviewees; 4 YOTs) or too generic (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). This was particularly noted in the sections on desistance (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs) and understanding future risks and behaviour (5 interviewees; 4 YOTs). However, it should be noted that only a handful of practitioners explicitly mentioned this as a reason why assessments could be repetitive (5 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

The non-linear nature of AssetPlus was a reason why practitioners took longer to complete an assessment

Several interviewees (10 interviewees; 6 YOTs) reported being aware that AssetPlus was designed to be a non-linear and fluid assessment tool. Of these, a few reported that they completed the tool in a non-linear fashion: either because they left 'trickier' parts until last (1 interviewee) or they started with the section dealing with understanding of offending behaviour first (1 interviewee).

Other interviewees and survey respondents reported that they found the non-linear nature of the framework confusing (6 interviewees; 6 YOTs).[22] When reasons were given, interviewees reported that the non-linear nature caused them to lose their place or miss out sections (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), or simply created more work (2 interviewees; 1 YOT). A few reported that working this way was not possible because they were prevented from progressing from section to section unless all boxes were complete (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). One manager reported that the YOT had issued guidance about where practitioners should start because of confusion about its non-linear nature (1 interviewee).

> 'I suppose Asset[Plus] feels a bit different in that there almost doesn't feel like a start and a finish, I can see the positives of that but it doesn't always feel like it when you're doing an Asset[Plus]. I like the thought of an open moving assessment tool that's quite easy to navigate and quite easy to dive in and out of but I feel that's what AssetPlus is trying to get to but I just feel it doesn't do that. It almost makes it quite difficult.' [INT42, YOT8]

Perception that AssetPlus was designed by non-practitioners

As a result of difficulties experienced, several interviewees felt that AssetPlus had been designed by individuals who did not have a sense of how it would be used in practice and without sufficient consultation with practitioners (5 interviewees; 5 YOTs). Another felt that it incorporated too many ideas all at once (1 interviewee) and a third that it was designed by someone who did not have confidence in practitioners knowing what information was needed (1 interviewee). As outlined in section 1.2, there was in fact a period of consultation with YOT practitioners and others when the tool was developed.

Difficulties navigating the tool

As explained in the introduction, IT implementation issues are outside of the scope of the study. However, it was clear during fieldwork that these issues were pervasive and were impacting on the ability

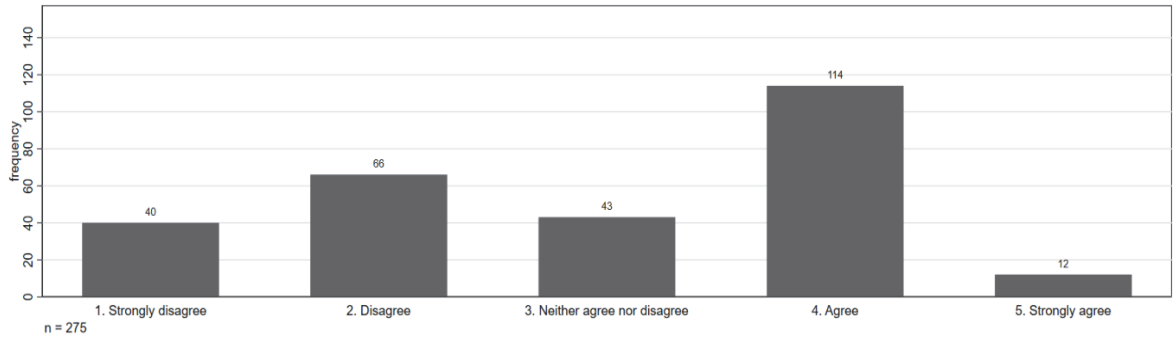
[22] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 5 out of 146 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

of YOTs to use AssetPlus in developing their assessments of and plans for children. We report these issues insofar as they pertain to the operational efficiency of the YOTs and the timeliness and quality of assessments undertaken. Some of the issues raised by interviewees and survey respondents relate to difficulties that may lie with CMS providers, rather than with the framework itself. However, separating these issues during data analysis proved difficult because the IT system greatly affected how practitioners experience AssetPlus on a daily basis.

> 'You know, the two [AssetPlus and the CMS] are just linked. The two are completely linked in our minds.' [INT52, YOT9]

Difficulties with navigation appeared to be widespread and affected many practitioners' experiences and perceptions of AssetPlus. Over half of interviewees (35 interviewees; 9 YOTs) mentioned that navigation was a problem when they used AssetPlus. Several interviewees described the tool as cumbersome, overly complex and very 'clunky' in format and interface (11 interviewees; 7 YOTs). To some extent, this is supported by survey responses: several of those who indicated that AssetPlus had increased their workload referred to navigational challenges as a cause,[23] similar comments arose in response to a question about navigation,[24] and navigational difficulties appeared in several other open-text questions (which asked about different experiences of AssetPlus) in the survey.

Figure 2: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: Overall, in my experience, AssetPlus is easy to navigate as a tool (practitioners' response)



However, when asked directly about ease of navigation, opinions varied between survey respondents. As shown in Figure 2, 45% (126/275) of practitioners who responded to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that AssetPlus was easy to navigate, while only slightly fewer (39%, 104/275) disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case. The different experiences that practitioners have had of navigating the tool are highlighted by the fact that there were also positive comments about this. A few interviewees and

[23] In response to an open-text question about the effect of AssetPlus upon workloads within AssetPlus: 22 of the 130 responses expressed this view.

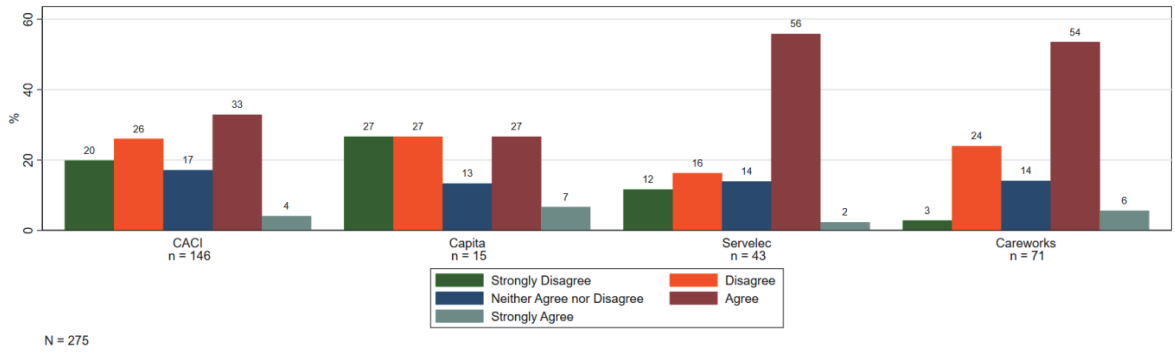
[24] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 29 out of 146 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

survey respondents commented that, while some parts were overly convoluted or complex, AssetPlus was generally easy to use, particularly after training or with more experience (6 interviewees; 3 YOTs).[25]

While we do not have sufficient evidence to comment authoritatively on the association between the IT system used and survey respondents' views, the information from the survey at least indicates that this might be usefully further investigated. While small sample sizes preclude firm findings, respondents from YOTs that used CACI and Capita were somewhat less likely to agree that AssetPlus was easy to navigate (28%, 54/194 and 21%, ([> 5]/24) than respondents from YOTs that used Careworks (45%, 42/94) or Servelec (48%, 25/52) (

Figure 3).

Figure 3: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: Overall, in my experience, AssetPlus is easy to navigate as a tool (practitioners' response, disaggregated by IT system)



Difficulty in identifying uncompleted sections

A number of interviewees and survey respondents noted that it was easy to miss sections entirely when completing AssetPlus (10 interviewees; 7 YOTs). This was often due to new questions 'popping up' when a particular answer was recorded in response to a previous question (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs),[26] without the tool alerting the practitioner. Similarly, interviewees reported that it was very difficult to see which sections had been completed during a previous session's work, which again added to the time they had to spend using the tool (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs), and meant that reviewing and updating AssetPlus could be difficult (1 interviewee). However, as another interviewee reported that they were able to use the tool to check where they had last got to when using AssetPlus, this may be a problem experienced at an IT system level rather than as a result of AssetPlus as a framework.

[25] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 8 out of 146 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

[26] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 17 out of 146 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

> 'You don't exactly know where you got to, especially if [an AssetPlus assessment] is pulled through from a previous assessment. Obviously, if there is a blank one, you can see where the boxes go blank, but sometimes, you go back to an assessment and you will be typing in and you think, oh no, I have done this section already. Whenever you go back to the assessment, you always think of something extra to put in anyway, so you don't necessarily realise for a while that you have already done this.' [INT44, YOT8]

Large number of boxes to be completed

Interviewees and survey respondents reported that the 'bitty' nature of the tool made navigation difficult (11 interviewees; 8 YOTs).[27] In particular, practitioners felt that the large number of boxes broke assessments down and caused users to lose the overall flow of the assessment. As a result, some practitioners reported having to jump around the tool in order to input information, which took time and caused them to lose their place (4 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'Because [AssetPlus is] so bitty, people honestly lose the will to live, so they don't really do it in a day, they might [...] do something else, as well. Yes, I'd say you're looking at a good day's work [to complete an AssetPlus], if you can bear with it that long.' [INT37, YOT3]

Information was not always pulled through from earlier sections in order to pre-populate later questions

Some interviewees and survey respondents reported that, due to IT system errors, information was not always pulled through from earlier to later sections (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs).[28] This sometimes rendered particular elements or modules of AssetPlus less useful. A few reported that information not pulling through meant that the graphs and timelines features were less useful (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'Again, an annoying feature [relating to the parents' assessment], obviously there's a bit in there about significant life events, that doesn't pull through. So you know, you're kind of like "well parents told me something, I've already put it in here, do I have to then put it in here again?"' [INT55, YOT9]

However, again highlighting the heterogeneity of views captured in this research, just over half of survey respondents (54%, 149/275) in fact agreed that information entered in one section of the AssetPlus framework was 'pulled through' to other sections in ways that helped their practice.

Navigation for the purposes of quality checking is difficult

Managers in a few YOTs reported some specific navigational problems that made carrying out quality assurance checks more time-consuming. This included general problems with the interface and difficulties commenting on specific sections (1 interviewee), and seeing what had been changed in reviews, meaning that reviewers had to check constantly what the difference was (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). One interviewee added that referring to specific elements that needed to be changed was laborious because they had to copy and paste text, signpost where this was, and then indicate what the text should be changed to, rather than being able to use a previously available simpler system where countersigners could flag changes (5 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

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[27] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 6 out of 146 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

[28] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 32 out of 146 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

However, there may be some variation between how AssetPlus was displayed between IT systems and YOTs that affects the usability of the tool when reviewing changes in an assessment. Some interviewees reported more helpful functions that facilitated their use of AssetPlus, such as: a green commenters' box (1 interviewee), a system that visually flagged what information had changed in an assessment (1 interviewee) and a split-screen function that allowed a reviewer to examine both an initial and an updated assessment concurrently, with changed areas highlighted (1 interviewee).

2.4. AssetPlus was perceived to be disproportionately time-consuming when used to assess children requiring little YOT intervention

Just over a third of all interviewees considered that AssetPlus was disproportionately time-consuming when used to assess children who had entered the youth justice system as prevention and out of court disposal (OOCD) cases (21 interviewees; 8 YOTs). Children who had received a Youth Caution (YC) (or a lower-level disposal) are seen by a practitioner only a few times and receive minimal intervention. In such cases, an AssetPlus assessment was frequently considered by practitioners to take too long and to require too much information. As a result, some practitioners reported that completing an AssetPlus for such low-contact children was 'extremely onerous' and sometimes caused frustration and low morale (5 interviewees; 5 YOTs).

> 'A significant part of our work [involves] youth conditional cautions and youth cautions which of course we can't use an alternative assessment tool for. So that's the issue that we've got is doing an extremely onerous assessment for very short piece of work. And that's more of an issue than the actual caseload numbers.' [INT43, YOT8]

At the time when the majority of research was carried out, YOT practitioners were required to complete assessments on the 'YJB-approved assessment' for children with out of court disposals within 10 days of referral (YJB 2013b). As explained in section 1.3, such requirements have since been replaced by guidelines that do not require the use of such an assessment for OOCD and prevention cases (YJB 2019a). Perhaps as a result, survey responses (collected in March–April 2019) indicate a variety in practice nationally in whether AssetPlus was used for prevention and OOCD cases. The same proportion of survey respondents reported that they 'never' (27%, 74/275) or 'always' (27%, 75/275) used AssetPlus for prevention cases. Another 22% (61/275) reported that they 'sometimes' used AssetPlus for these children. Respondents were more likely to use AssetPlus for OOCD cases: 48% said they 'always' or 'often' used AssetPlus (132/275), while 24% 'never' or 'rarely' used AssetPlus for these purposes (66/275).

However, only a minority of survey respondents considered AssetPlus to be a time-efficient tool for prevention and OOCD cases. Just under half (46%, 125/275) of practitioners disagreed or strongly disagreed that AssetPlus was time-efficient for prevention cases, while a slightly higher proportion (58%, 148/275) disagreed or strongly disagreed that AssetPlus was time-efficient for OOCD cases. When asked to provide more detail about whether AssetPlus included an appropriate and justified amount of questions for their typical caseload, almost half of responses to this open-text question indicated that AssetPlus was

too long and detailed for use with prevention and OOCD cases.[29] Several respondents suggested that a condensed version of AssetPlus should be developed for these individuals.[30]

However, the importance of practitioners making decisions on a case-by-case basis in low-intervention situations was highlighted by interviewees who acknowledged that a full AssetPlus assessment would still be needed at a later stage for some children in preventative and OOCD work (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). Two interviewees from the same YOT felt that the complexity of the cases classed as OOCD cases in their area was such that completing AssetPlus was useful in many such cases (2 interviewees; 1 YOT).

> 'When you get something in like [Youth Caution case, very low-level offending], that kind of tool…[is]… counterproductive because it's going to take up however long to try and get that young person in with their family to complete the assessment, so in that kind of situation, it's complete overkill. But having said that, for the more complex cases, it's an incredibly comprehensive tool. So, it's a bit of a double-edged sword.' [INT26, YOT7]

Practitioners reported that they did not complete a more streamlined version of AssetPlus for prevention or OOCD cases

AssetPlus was designed with the intention that practitioners would be able to use it to complete a more streamlined and shorter assessment for children attending the YOT on an OOCD and preventative basis (YJB 2014a). A few reported that they were aware of this (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs) and two managers from the same YOT reported that they only completed AssetPlus for higher risk OOCD cases (2 interviewees; 1 YOT). Another manager from another YOT reported that they had devised a shorter version of AssetPlus (1 interviewee). However, more interviewees emphasised that they had not utilised the streamlined version, and that assessments were completed in the same way for preventative and OOCD cases as for more complex cases (8 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

This may indicate confusion around the requirements for when an AssetPlus should be used. While the YJB has not in fact set such requirements in place, a few interviewees reported that completing a very detailed AssetPlus for all cases was required by the YJB (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). A few interviewees also feared criticism for omitting important information, particularly from inspectors (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs) and from seniors within their YOT (1 interviewee).

The nature of AssetPlus may also dissuade practitioners from completing more streamlined versions. A few interviewees reported that they did try to complete AssetPlus in a more streamlined manner for lower-risk cases, but found the process complicated because initial questions could 'open a can of worms', and it was then difficult to know when to stop (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Some practitioners reported that they found it difficult to leave many boxes or fields blank because the broad phrasing of questions (particularly about the existence of risks) meant that it was difficult to reply in the absolute negative, leading to more and more detailed questions (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). Two interviewees also commented that their IT

[29] In response to an open-text question about whether AssetPlus included an appropriate and justified amount of questions: 33 out of 77 survey responses to this question expressed this view.

[30] In response to an open-text question about whether AssetPlus included an appropriate and justified amount of questions: 6 out of 77 survey responses to this question made this suggestion.

system required that all boxes in all sections were completed before other elements (including modules) could be used (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

Several reported alternative assessment arrangements for prevention and OOCD cases

In response to the challenges of using AssetPlus in OOCD and prevention cases, a few YOTs had developed alternative processes to assessing these cases, outside the AssetPlus framework. These are reported in Box 1.

Box 1: Alternative YOT approaches to prevention and OOCD cases

- Developing a triage process with a panel for YC and YCCs, with a more condensed assessment. This condensed assessment uses headings from AssetPlus and provides guidance about what should be entered into each section (2 interviewees; 1 YOT).
- Using Onset for preventative and OOCD cases up until YC (from which point AssetPlus was used to make an assessment) (1 interviewee).
- Developing a triage system with other agencies where children who would usually enter the system with OOCDs are channelled elsewhere. While this was not in direct response to AssetPlus, the interviewee considered this had been a consideration when developing the multi-agency working framework (1 interviewee).
- One interviewee suggested that an assessment framework that bridged the gap between the youth justice system and the social care system was needed, in a current landscape that is seeing a rise in preventative and OOCD cases (1 interviewee).

2.5. AssetPlus was perceived to be onerous in YOTs with high caseloads

AssetPlus was felt to be particularly onerous when used to carry out assessments and devise plans when caseloads were high (10 interviewees; 6 YOTs). Some of these interviewees reported that their own high caseloads made AssetPlus an onerous task (7 interviewees; 4 YOTs), and some considered that AssetPlus was a helpful tool only when practitioners held low caseloads (5 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

> 'Because at the moment it just feels like an unwieldy beast, you know, in terms of if you've only got one or two cases to deal with, AssetPlus would be fine. But if you've got a caseload to deal with it's a very different experience.' [INT40, YOT8]

2.6. YOTs' interpretations of quality assurance and review requirements may be a factor in why AssetPlus was considered time-consuming

AssetPlus was designed to allow reviews at regular intervals and to allow specific sections to be updated when there are significant changes in a child's life (YJB 2016, YJB 2014a). Standards around AssetPlus reviews that are set internally by YOTs may add to their workloads. Under the 2013 national standards (YJB 2013b) that were in place at the time of interviews, AssetPlus assessments had to be reviewed at least every six months or whenever changes in a child's life were significant enough to require changes to the

intervention plan.[31] Several interviewees reported that reviews were carried out more frequently, for example every three months (5 interviewees; 3 YOTs). In addition, a few practitioners indicated that they would rather carry out more frequent reviews than they currently did, but lacked the time to do so (5 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

Guidance on completing AssetPlus does not require all sections to be updated during a review, unless considered necessary (YJB 2016). Just under a third of all interviewees, however, said that there was an expectation that practitioners would update a reviewed AssetPlus in its entirety, even when only a small change in details was needed (14 interviewees; 7 YOTs). Without such extensive updates, interviewees reported that those with countersigning responsibilities would not approve a review.

> 'So, [reviewing is about] having everything in your head so that you're understanding exactly why, well okay if you're going to change this in terms of a risk level then you need to go back, so […] say the young person is no longer in school. It's not just updating it to say the young person is no longer in school, you've got to look at your risk levels again, you've got to look at all the systems factors, you've got to look at everything again and it's that I think that makes it a bigger job.' [INT36, YOT3]

As a result, practitioners reported that carrying out and countersigning reviews could be laborious. Several interviewees (four of which were from the same YOT) felt that assessments on AssetPlus were therefore not rolling and fluid as intended, because practitioners could not, in practice, record children's rapidly changing circumstances in the manner that was envisaged (5 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

Of the 14 interviewees who cited this as a reason why using AssetPlus was time-consuming, just over half (8 interviewees) were from the same two YOTs. Therefore, some responsibility for the lack of operational efficiencies may lie with particular internal management standards set for quality assuring reviews of AssetPlus.

Partly in order to facilitate frequent reviews, YOTs are expected to have quality assurance processes that include managerial oversight of the assessment and planning practice (in practice, countersigning the Explanations and Conclusions and Pathways and Planning sections). In AssetPlus, quality assurance is designed to be 'a collaborative approach' between practitioners and managers with the aim of improving practice (YJB 2016). YOTs have flexibility to decide which cases require countersignature, in line with the criteria set out in AssetPlus guidance (YJB 2016).

However, there is some indication that managers may be countersigning all AssetPlus assessments in some YOTs, rather than the YOT management using their discretion to decide when an assessment required countersignature. This was an issue identified by two interviewees, who reported that their YOT has decided to require countersigning on all AssetPlus assessments and to require reviews every three months following an inspection report (1 interviewee).

[31] The current *Standards for children in the youth justice system* (2019) do not specify precise time periods but state that the assessment should be 'ongoing and dynamic' (YJB 2019a).

2.7. The perceived time-consuming nature of AssetPlus affected practitioners' roles, responsibilities and working practices

Some practitioners felt that they had less time to spend working with children

Some interviewees felt that the time-consuming nature of AssetPlus meant that they spent more time at their desks at the expense of direct, face-to-face time with children (12 interviewees; 7 YOTs). This was particularly felt to be an issue when a substantive assessment was completed for short-term pieces of work or low-level offences (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). Such sentiments were echoed by survey respondents in response to an open-text question about the impact of AssetPlus on workloads, usually explaining that AssetPlus meant they spent less time with children or on other tasks.[32] Some interviewees reported feeling overwhelmed, as well as juggling the need for good assessment with the need to actually have time to undertake the work required.

> 'You could have the best AssetPlus assessment that looks fabulous but you won't have the time to do the work that you're saying that you're going to do. … well, you're constantly juggling like that all the time. You're on a knife edge.' [INT40, YOT8]

A few interviewees also commented that completing AssetPlus took time away from other priority tasks including working with other agencies (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs) and making improvements to other practices (1 interviewee).

2.8. Interviewees and survey respondents had mixed views about how far AssetPlus encourages multi-agency working

The research team examined research question 1 (the perceived impact of AssetPlus on roles, responsibilities and working practices) by exploring multi-agency working and practitioners' reported use of professional judgement. The results of both are discussed below.

Some interviewees, including both managers and practitioners, reported that AssetPlus encouraged practitioners to work more closely with other agencies, including communicating and sharing information (14 interviewees; 7 YOTs). Of these, a few felt the intervention plan was particularly helpful (4 interviewees; 2 YOTs). One interviewee specifically commented that agencies were able to access information more readily as a result of AssetPlus, because it allowed all the information to be sent as one document and therefore acted as a 'one stop shop' (2 interviewees; 1 YOT).

> 'Well, I suppose speaking to other agencies and pulling information from them as well, and I suppose then that helps you inform your assessment, so it's more multi-agency working, but also ensures that you're doing an in-depth assessment, rather than just [from] your information that you've got from your interview. So, I'd probably say, yes, there's a lot more emphasis on multi-agency working and information gathering.' [INT26, YOT7]

[32] In response to an open-text question about the effect of AssetPlus upon workloads: 19 out of 131 survey respondents to this question expressed this view.

However, others did not think that AssetPlus had particularly encouraged multi-agency working (13 interviewees; 7 YOTs). Of these, the majority considered that other practice and policy changes had already led to successful multi-agency working and the integration of youth justice into other children's services (10 interviewees; 7 YOTs). Some also felt that AssetPlus was too large to share with other agencies (8 interviewees: 5 YOTs). As a result, one interviewee expressed frustration that their assessments would not be useful but instead 'just sat there' (1 interviewee), and some practitioners felt that the value of AssetPlus was not widely recognised because it was confusing to understand (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'I think yes, while [AssetPlus] does capture safeguarding, risks and concerns in there, again because there's so much information going in that sometimes they get overlooked.' [INT32, YOT6]

The size and difficulties navigating within AssetPlus meant that it could be hard to find the necessary information within an AssetPlus, which lessened the usefulness of completed assessments, particularly to other professionals (11 interviewees; 7 YOTs). In particular, this was a problem when trying to share information about a child with other YOTs or a secure establishment, which required ease and speed (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs).[33] Similar sentiments were echoed in comments by survey respondents.[34] One interviewee made the following suggestion:

> 'I think one way of improving it straight away […] would be a summary section. For every single AssetPlus, there would be another box at the bottom, which would be a summary. It would take out the salient points of each of the three sections, so if a social worker came to a member of staff and said, "I'm working with Child X. Could you give me a summary of his assessment, or can you give me a summary of his risk issues?", [then] you could press on the summary and it would tell you the key bits of information. It would tell you the key risk factors and what they mean, and it would give you explanations. It would be just in one page so that someone could read it and go, "Yes actually just by reading that, I've got a flavour of who this young person is, what their risks are".' [INT28, YOT7]

2.9. AssetPlus encouraged the use of practitioners' professional judgement

Over half of all interviewees – both managers and practitioners – considered that AssetPlus enables them to exercise professional judgement when making an assessment (30 interviewees; 10 YOTs). At interview, the impact of AssetPlus on professional judgement was explored by questions that centred particularly on practitioners' confidence and willingness to override the YOGRS score (Youth Offender Group Reconviction Scale), which calculates the risk of a child reoffending based on a number of static factors.[35]

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[33] YOT-to-YOT sharing of AssetPlus will be implemented in Phase III, expected to be implemented in autumn 2019.

[34] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 17 out of the 146 who responded to that question expressed this view.

[35] AssetPlus is programmed to calculate and display the YOGRS score as part of the Explanations and Conclusions section, based on prior information entered in the Core Record. The score is displayed as a percentage of the likelihood of proven reoffending in two years and as a rating (high, medium or low risk). Practitioners are then asked to give their own rating of the child and to provide a rationale as to why their rating differs (if applicable). (YJB, undated)

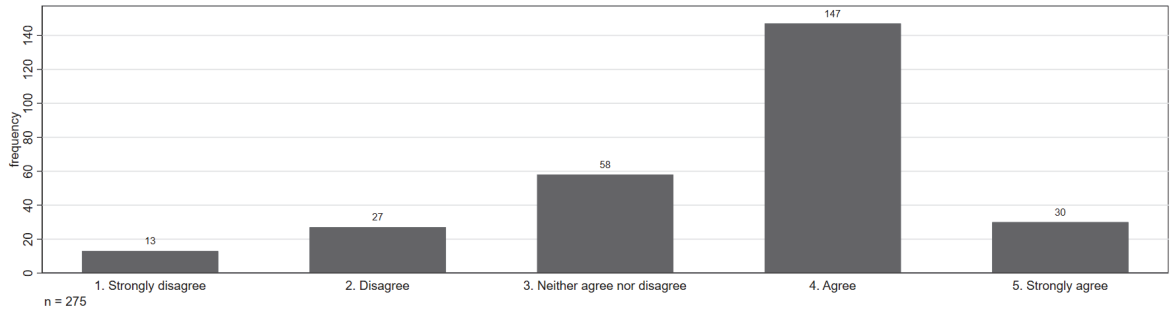
Most of the interviewees who felt that AssetPlus enabled their professional judgement reported that they could exercise professional judgement when assessing the risk of future harmful behaviour, including when overriding the YOGRS score (21 interviewees; 10 YOTs). Around half of these interviewees explained that they or their team frequently overrode the YOGRS score when necessary (10 interviewees; 7 YOTs). When given, the main reason for overriding YOGRS scores was practitioners' access to further contextual knowledge and information (such as a deeper understanding of the offence or intelligence about gang involvement) that they felt AssetPlus could not take into account (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs). A few explained that they found the ability to override, and the requirement to provide a reason for overriding, to be helpful in encouraging their assessment (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). However, some interviewees felt they or their team were less confident or able to override YOGRS, either overall or in particular cases, although interviewees generally could not comment on what was causing the issue (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'And [AssetPlus] also gives you an opportunity to say that you don't agree with the [YOGRS] score, which is brilliant, [be]cause you could say "Right, you know, our indicative assessed level of risk is blah, blah, [be]cause that's how you've taken it through the form and through the assessment, and it will calculate it." But you might [think] "well, actually, because that could just be determined by the way you filled something in". You can actually say "well actually, no, I'm assessing this as high because I feel this is the main reason." And it could be something like a complete lack of empathy or, you know, something that maybe isn't ticked on the way through.' [INT3, YOT1]

A few interviewees reported that they also used their professional judgement in the Explanations and Conclusions section of the tool (7 interviewees; 5 YOTs).

The majority of survey respondents also considered that AssetPlus allowed space for them to use their professional judgement when making assessments: 60% (177/275) of practitioners and 70% (64/89) of managers either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: AssetPlus allows space for me to use my professional judgement when making assessments (practitioners' responses)



In contrast, some interviewees did not think that AssetPlus had particularly enabled practitioners to exercise their professional judgement (12 interviewees; 5 YOTs). Of these, a few interviewees reported that, in their experience, practitioners sometimes felt that AssetPlus had contributed to their professional judgement becoming less, rather than more, important (4 interviewees; 2 YOTs). When reasons were given, these included: the AssetPlus structure of breaking down assessment and analysis into a number of boxes (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs); because they no longer had the authority to make their own decisions (1

interviewee); and because AssetPlus did not give enough focus to broader contextual concerns identified by practitioners (1 interviewee).

3. The perceived impact of AssetPlus on the quality of assessments and intervention plans

Key findings

- Considerable variation exists regarding perceptions of whether AssetPlus supports high-quality assessment and high-quality intervention plans.
- Features of AssetPlus that supported high-quality assessments include the way in which the framework included relevant information, encouraged a focus on the child's strengths, promoted good analysis and encouraged precision when judging a child's future behaviour and associated risks.
- Features of AssetPlus that were considered to hinder high-quality assessments included the number of boxes and tick-boxes, its considerable size as a tool, occasional lapses in clarity and specificity, and a lack of child- and user-friendliness. These features 2343 closely related to the features of AssetPlus that practitioners felt made it a time-consuming tool (see section 2.3).
- Some external factors may also have affected the extent to which AssetPlus was considered to support high-quality assessment, including the ability and skills of the practitioner, the extent of training received and the tight timescales within which AssetPlus previously had to be completed.
- The quality of information gathered, the self-assessment and the focus on children's strengths were all elements of AssetPlus that were felt to be helpful when developing intervention plans.
- Concerns around the usefulness of AssetPlus in developing intervention plans focused on the lack of user- and child-friendliness of the Pathways and Planning section.
- Many YOTs are creating their own intervention plans and some practitioners offered other innovative ideas for how the Intervention & Planning section could be reformed.

AssetPlus was designed to help practitioners produce high-quality assessments that are 'well-informed, analytical and personalised, actively involving the child or young person and their parents/carers' (HMIP 2018). Features including the collection and analysis of a broader range of information, a greater focus on a child's strengths and pathways to desistance, and the importance laid upon comparing static and dynamic factors were all intended to enhance practitioners' ability to understand the interactions between different factors in a child's life and to analyse patterns of behaviour. In addition, more specific definitions of risk that distinguished impact, likelihood and imminence were designed to facilitate practitioners' judgements about children's possible future outcomes (YJB 2014b).

Furthermore, AssetPlus was intended to promote a 'stronger link between assessment and plan' (YJB 2013a). The Pathways and Planning section in AssetPlus was developed to aid practitioners in producing plans that 'balance goals associated with minimising risk and harm to others with goals linked to promoting the young person's own positive development', including prompts to encourage assessors 'to specify how strengths identified during the assessment can be developed during interventions to support positive change' (YJB 2014b).

This chapter addresses research questions 3 and 4 (how, if at all, AssetPlus has affected the quality of assessment and intervention plans).

3.1. Considerable variation in perceptions of whether AssetPlus supports high-quality assessment

Over half of interviewees (34 interviewees; 10 YOTs) reported that overall, they felt AssetPlus helped them to make high-quality assessments. However, the same number (34 interviewees; 10 YOTs) – including some of the same interviewees – also considered that there were elements of AssetPlus that did not help them make high-quality assessments. This picture of very different views and experiences was also reflected in the survey findings (Figure 5 and Figure 6). Just over half of practitioners (57%, 156/275) and three-quarters of managers (76%, 68/89) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'using AssetPlus helps you or your team to make good quality assessments'. However, just under a quarter (23%, 63/275) of practitioners indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed about whether AssetPlus helped good quality assessments, and a fifth (20%, 53/275) of practitioners disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Figure 5: Based on your professional experience, please rate how much you agree with the following statement: Using AssetPlus helps me to make good quality assessments (practitioners' response)

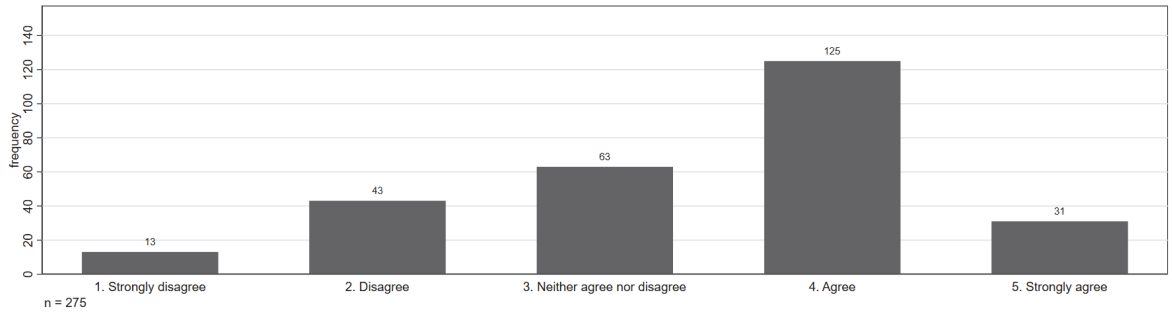
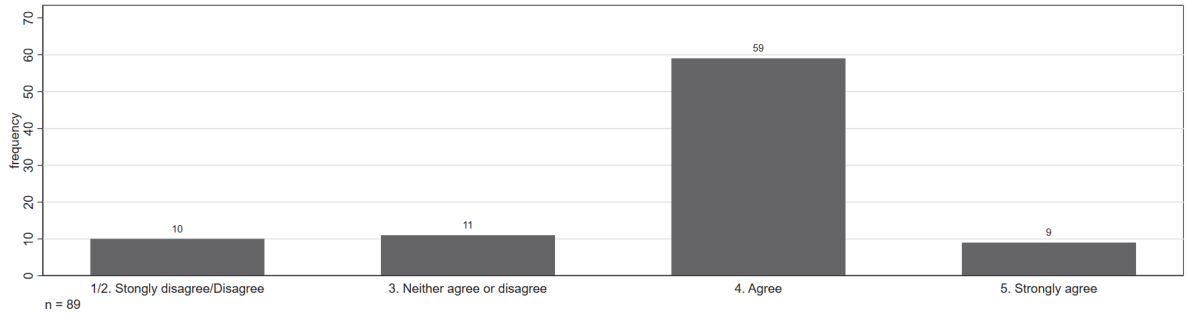


Figure 6: Thinking about your team, how far do you agree with the following statements about AssetPlus: Using AssetPlus helps my team to make good quality assessments (managers' response)[36]



3.2. Features of AssetPlus that supported high-quality assessment

The sections that follow explore how and why AssetPlus supported high-quality assessment.

The inclusion of high-quality and relevant information

Around one third of interviewees reported that the Information Gathering section helped create high-quality assessments (21 interviewees; 9 YOTs). The main reason given was that the information was detailed and wide-ranging (12 interviewees; 8 YOTs). The result, some reported, was a holistic image of a child's life that was built by pulling together information from many different sources and agencies (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

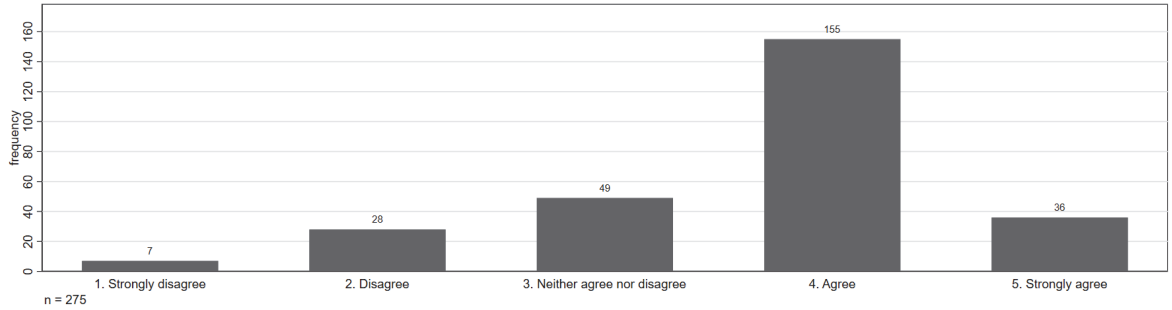
> 'This system is brilliant for getting you to gather all that information and think about why they are where they are at the minute and where they might be going in the future.' [INT3, YOT1]

> 'I would say, the benefit is, by the time you've finished one you should have gathered as much information about the young person as possible, which means that you might have a broader understanding about some of the key areas, issues and positives in the young person's life. So, at the end of it, there is a sense where you, kind of, have quite more of an understanding of the young person.' [INT48, YOT10]

Survey responses showed a similar picture (Figure 7). The majority of practitioners (70%, 191/275) and managers (85%, 76/89) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'the AssetPlus framework allows them (or their team) to include all the relevant information needed to make an assessment of a child's need'. Only a small proportion of practitioners (12.7%, 35/275) and managers (9%, 8/89) disagreed.

[36] Answers have been aggregated to avoid disclosure where there were fewer than 5 respondents.

Figure 7: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: The AssetPlus framework allows me to include all the relevant information I need to make an assessment of a child's need (practitioners' response)



Some interviewees also reported that they felt they were prompted and guided by the tool to include more or different sorts of information about a child, as compared to what they might include otherwise (14 interviewees; 5 YOTs). Four interviewees reported that the self-assessment element within AssetPlus enabled them to collect information about a child that they would not otherwise have included (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

> 'I think you need to be able to draw out from your interview with the young person and the family the salient points... And, that is where Asset[Plus] is quite good, because there are so many questions and prompts that you should be able to do that. So, that's the good bit, it does cover an awful lot and it prompts you an awful lot, it's just not that coherent, is what I think.' [INT39, YOT3]

A focus on a child's strengths and pathways to desistance

Around half of all interviewees, including both managers and practitioners, reported that AssetPlus encouraged practitioners to consider and record positive factors in a child's life (20 interviewees; 10 YOTs) and allowed them to present a holistic view of a child and their life (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). As a result, they considered their assessments to be improved. Some interviewees considered that this holistic focus on strengths represented a significant and positive development from the more risk-based approach of the Asset framework (6 interviewees; 6 YOTs), and regarded it as a particularly innovative feature of AssetPlus (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

A focus on a child's strengths was possible due to the embeddedness of the Foundations for Change section – where factors that might promote behavioural change are listed – in the framework. This ensured that positive factors could influence the assessment as a whole (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), and enabled the inclusion of self- and parent- assessments, which also highlighted a child's strengths (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). As well as being important in a child's assessment, the focus on a child's strengths might also make the process of working on an AssetPlus more enjoyable (1 interviewee).

> 'On the flipside, I think [AssetPlus] is better for looking at positives and strengths, and I like the way it guides you to list everything for and against [desistance], but especially for [desistance]: because it makes you think of any little thing. And those little things can be massive in terms of change. You think of one little thing that that young person's done well or did well, you know, that they would consider.' [INT3, YOT1]

Other interviewees, however, reported that they felt AssetPlus did not focus enough on a child's strengths (6 interviewees; 3 YOTs) because of the ongoing focus on offending (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), and because of the way in which practitioners used the tool (1 interviewee) and understood desistance (1

interviewee). A few interviewees also felt that the increased emphasis on the 'whole child' within AssetPlus reflected other trends and changes within the sector and did not identify AssetPlus as a key driver (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'I would like [AssetPlus] to be more welfare, more social, more environmental and less about offending. Because the offence is just a small part of the reason why we're working with [the child]. It could be more for attention. You've committed a crime, you come to a justice system, you have come to us for this...yes, but the issues are far more significant than actually the offending.' [INT4, YOT1]

Elements that facilitate high-quality analysis

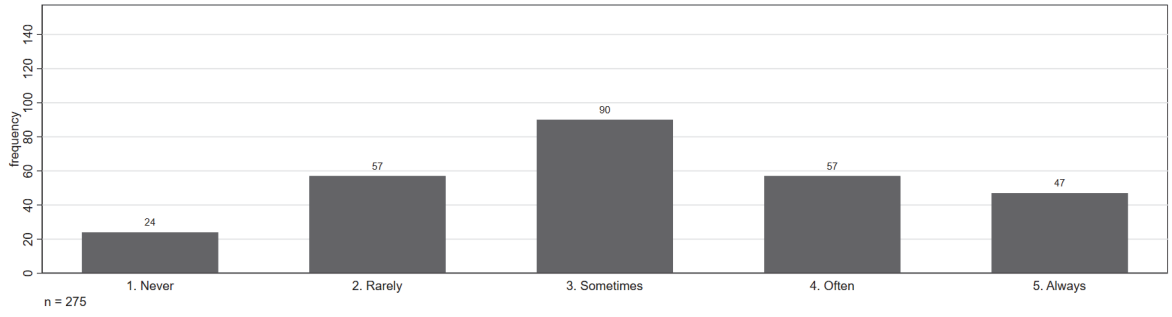
A few interviewees reported that the questions included in AssetPlus helped them to be more analytical and produce high-quality assessments (7 interviewees; 4 YOTs). Others felt that the clearly defined sections also facilitated their analysis (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'With the new AssetPlus, it pushes you to analyse the information in front of you and it prompts you to do that. So, with the old Asset, the assessment was only as good as the person filling it out. With this new AssetPlus it makes you better if that makes sense.' [INT31, YOT6]

Just under a third of all interviewees reported that the graphs and timelines featured in AssetPlus aided their analysis and helped them to make high-quality assessments (15 interviewees; 6 YOTs). Several explained that they felt the graphs and timelines helped them to identify patterns and interlinking factors in children's behaviour and offending (7 interviewees; 5 YOTs). Survey respondents also indicated that these graphs and timelines were frequently in use (Figure 8). The majority of practitioners (71%, 194/275) indicated that they 'always', 'often' or 'sometimes' used the features of the tool (including graphs and timelines) to identify patterns in a child's life, while 21% (57/275) reported that they 'never' used them. While responses to this question strictly indicate use of these features, rather than a belief that they were helpful, nonetheless the widespread use of these features can be taken as broadly suggestive of their value. The below demonstrates how one practitioner used the timeline feature to better understand a child's patterns of behaviour:

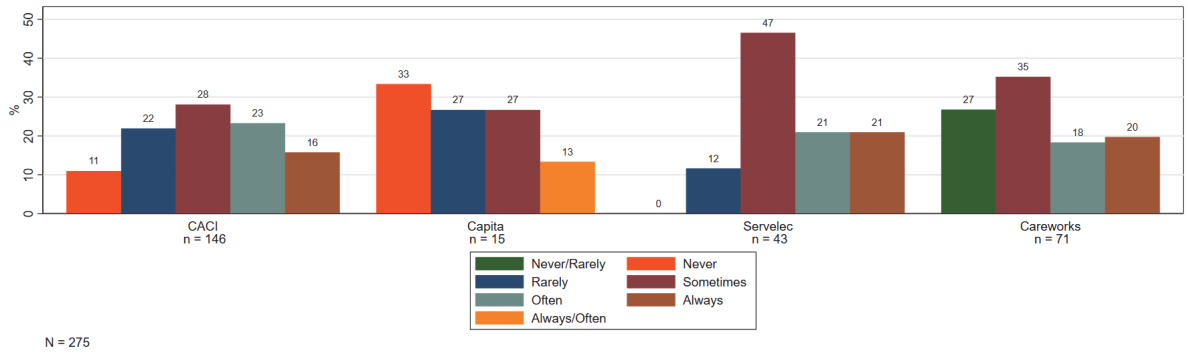
> 'So, you can go, actually, all right, there is a big period of desistence [shown on the graph], and maybe I need to ask [the child] about that, and is there anything that's overlaying? What was working well then or not, and I suppose you tend […] highlight the negatives more in there. So, if [a child's] dad died, and then nine months later you've got a load of aggressive offences, that makes sense of that. Or if you've just got this massive period of desistence, [you think] "I don't actually know what that is, but it is worth having a conversation with them about what was working well".' [INT29, YOT6]

Figure 8: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I use the features of the tool (e.g. graphs, timelines) in order to identify patterns in a child's life (practitioners' response)



There are some differences in how survey respondents reported finding the AssetPlus graphs and timelines, depending on which IT system was used in their YOT. As demonstrated in Figure 9, a larger proportion of survey respondents in YOTs using the Capita IT system reported that they 'never' used these tools (33%, [> 5]/15) compared to the other IT systems (11%, 16/146 from CACI; 4%, [> 5]/71 from Careworks; none from Servelec). However, the extremely small number of respondents who used Capita means that we cannot be sure that variation in perceptions and experience of these graphs and timelines can be attributed accurately to the IT system (see Figure 9 for more information).

Figure 9: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I use the features of the tool (e.g. graphs, timelines) in order to identify patterns in a child's life (practitioners' response, disaggregated by IT system)[37]



The helpfulness of these graphs and tools was sometimes limited by difficulties in functionalities and the user-unfriendly display of AssetPlus: some found that graphs and timelines could be visually confusing and difficult to navigate, particularly when printed (8 interviewees; 4 YOTs).[38] As a result, a few practitioners reported that they did not use these graphs and tools in their practice (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

> 'I struggle to navigate around the graph, particularly if there's multiple offences.... What we...have at the moment is a cohort of repeat offenders where there's so much information in there it's meaningless. [For] children who are first time offenders or very limited history [...] you're not seeing anything significant in there which you haven't extrapolated from the information that's already been completed.' [INT43, YOT8]

The amalgamation of documents around risk management and encouragement of precision

Some interviewees considered that the amalgamation of previously separate documents around risk management and vulnerability within the one framework was a benefit of AssetPlus, because everything was in one place and properly integrated into the assessment (12 interviewees; 6 YOTs).

A few interviewees reported that the level of detail that they were required to enter in the section regarding future behaviour, safety and well-being (where practitioners were asked to detail each individual

[37] Answers have been aggregated to avoid disclosure where there were fewer than 5 respondents.

[38] This was not asked about in any open-text question. However, in response to an open-text question asking about final comments on AssetPlus, 4 out of 218 survey responses expressed this view.

possible future behaviour, its possible victim, its impact on others and its likelihood of occurring) improved their analysis (5 interviewees; 5 YOTs). Reasons given included the requirement to offer evidence to explain their ratings (1 interviewee), the ability to use their professional judgement (1 interviewee), and the possibility of examining the potential impact on the victims (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'I think it's probably better than the old risk of serious harm assessment because you're having to pin down exactly what the risks and the concerns are, so you're having to be much [more] explicit […], you're not just saying somebody is a reasonable risk of harm or a high risk of serious harm, you're saying these are the explicit concerns and you can kind of almost have a different rating for how likely those concerns are to rise and that is a positive aspect of it.' [INT19, YOT2]

3.3. Features of AssetPlus that were felt to hinder high-quality assessment

As discussed in section 3.1, over half of interviewees (34 interviewees; 10 YOTs) reported that AssetPlus sometimes hindered the quality of assessments that they made. The reasons given overlapped considerably with the features that made AssetPlus a time-consuming tool (see section 2.3).

The number of separate boxes and 'bitty' nature

As discussed in section 2.3, over half of all interviewees reported that AssetPlus, as implemented in the IT system used by their YOT, was difficult to navigate (35 interviewees; 9 YOTs). Over half of these also considered that difficulty navigating AssetPlus affected the quality of their assessments, and specifically mentioned the number of boxes that had to be completed as a limiting factor (20 interviewees; 10 YOTs).

Several reported that they felt the information that they entered and the analysis they tried to do was too broken up and 'bitty' as a result of the number of boxes (10 interviewees; 8 YOTs). As a result, doing analysis was unnecessarily difficult for some because information was too broken down (5 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Others felt that the number of boxes included in the Information Gathering section made this largely a box-ticking exercise and limited their ability to enter other non-specified information that they considered important (4 interviewees; 2 YOTs). Some considered that the number of boxes overall made it difficult to construct an overall and holistic narrative of a child (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'I think for me the old Asset […] lent itself to telling you the story of the young person and their family, whereas this is just too boxy and bitty.' [INT39, YOT3]

In particular, some interviewees felt that the number of boxes in the risks and future behaviour section of AssetPlus had a particular effect on their ability to judge the likelihood, imminence and nature of a child's future behaviour and well-being because analysis was so broken down (8 interviewees; 5 YOTs). Of these, three considered that it limited their professional judgement when assessing these matters (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs), as explored in section 2.8. As a result, a few interviewees said that AssetPlus was not a sufficiently flexible tool with which to judge the risk of reoffending and future harm: because the extensive tick-boxes and drop-down menus made it hard to include risks that fell outside of the options given (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs), and because dynamic factors entered by the practitioner were not automatically pulled through to later sections in the same way as static factors were (2 interviewees; 2

YOTs). Analysis may be improved if more narration was possible, through the provision of larger text boxes instead of smaller tick-boxes (1 interviewee).

> 'A lot of it's a tick box exercise, so it'll prompt you to think about certain things, which I suppose in some ways is good, because...some practitioners might overlook certain aspects, so it does prompt you. However, on the other hand, it can feel like you're doing a bit more of a tick box exercise.' [INT26, YOT7]

This may be compounded by flaws in some IT systems. For instance, difficulties accessing some elements of the tool on the IT system led to confusion about where practitioners should enter their reasoning for the rating they had given to particular risks of future harm (1 interviewee).

Lack of clarity and specificity in sections exploring risk and future behaviour

Concerns about the risk and future behaviour section in AssetPlus were raised by just under half of all interviewees, and mainly focused on issues of clarity and specificity (24 interviewees; 10 YOTs). Of these, some reported that the categories used in the section were not always clear and easy to understand (9 interviewees; 5 YOTs). A few felt that the language used more generally in this section was confusing (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'This is the other problem with [the list of language options to use in the risk and future behaviour section] because it's so confusing. […] I think it should be a bit more specific if I'm honest. I think it's too confusing as to what you should and shouldn't put in, what is the actual focus.' [INT7, YOT4]

> 'I think staff find that unbelievably confusing, [that] you have to actually be in the "major" category before you can be "medium", but you can be in the "medium" category, but you have to be "low". It's just ridiculous. If they ever decided, those words would be a good way of doing it, I think. A bit crazy. I think it would be best if it was made clear in the matrix.' [INT28, YOT7]

Definitions were also not always clear: a few managers and senior practitioners expressed concern that practitioners were not always able to differentiate properly between harm and serious harm, based on the language that was used in the framework (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'I don't think there's a clear enough divide between what "harm" is and what could be "serious harm". I think…if that's the point, I think you could easily miss someone who's going to commit serious harm as opposed to somebody who isn't.' [INT28, YOT7]

In contrast to other interviewees who felt that the section dealing with risk and future behaviour was too specific, some reported that this section was not specific enough and 'doesn't ask the right questions' (7 interviewees; 6 YOTs). Most attributed this to the amalgamation of the previously separate documents (i.e. the vulnerability management plan and risk management plan) into AssetPlus, but offered little further explanation (5 interviews; 4 YOTs).

> 'Our VMPs and our RMPs were tangible documents where you're [saying] "these were the risks, this is what I'm doing to address it", and it was a document that you could share with other professionals. You don't have that now, so it's not as concise.' [INT29, YOT6]

Lack of a child-friendly and integrated self-assessment tool

Some interviewees found the self-assessment and parental assessments helpful when incorporating the child's voice into their assessment (11 interviewees; 7 YOTs). This was because self-assessments aided

information gathering (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs), encouraged a focus on desistance (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs) and could be a useful tool with which to engage parents and incorporate their opinions (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'It makes me concentrate more on the young person's views, it makes me think about the self-assessment in particular, it makes me concentrate more on their views and the parents' views. So, I'm not saying I didn't do that before, but it is a real reminder to get their views and to build that into the plan. […] In particular in the offending there's a little box where we talk about how the young person feels before and after the offence. I find that really useful.' [INT12, YOT5]

However, the majority of interviewees who mentioned the self-assessment and parental assessment reported that it did not help the quality of their assessment (17 interviewees; 9 YOTs). The self-assessment tool was reported to lack colour and consist of a large number of tick-boxes and unattractive text-boxes that used language that was not child-friendly (6 interviewees; 3 YOTs). As a result, these practitioners did not feel that it was a useful tool to use with children, particularly children with low levels of literacy or learning disabilities (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). A few felt that the questions in the self-assessment were not always relevant (2 interviewees; 1 YOT), not sufficiently sensitive (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), and not suitable for looked-after children (1 interviewee).

In addition, some respondents felt that the self-assessment and parental assessments were not integrated into the AssetPlus framework and so could not have a significant impact on the overall assessment in the same way that other elements of the assessment could (5 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Reasons cited included the fact that these were non-mandatory sections and were paper documents rather than online sections, meaning information could not always 'pull through' to other sections of AssetPlus, in the same way that it did from other sections. As a result, a few managers reported that the degree to which the self-assessment was used to inform the rest of the assessment depended on the YOT practitioner (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'I like the idea of the young person assessment being actually within the Information Gathering section. However, it just feels like they just picked the self-assessment and dumped it in the system and now it does nothing. To me, it could be something that can […] be more active in terms of, when you actually put things in [the self-assessment], that would then populate other parts of [AssetPlus]. […] So if the young person puts in that they've got issues with substances, or "Someone like me has issues with substances," in the Substance Misuse section, it would flag up there saying, "The young person has…answered this. Do you want to comment on that?" But at the moment it doesn't.' [INT28, YOT7]

The size and length

As discussed in section 2.3, the size of AssetPlus was another weakness reported with the tool (24 interviewees; 9 YOTs). Of these, a few specified that the size of the tool meant that they did not have time to enter all information required or complete a high-quality assessment (6 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

Relatedly, several interviewees reported fatigue as they completed AssetPlus due to its length (9 interviewees; 6 YOTs). However, only two explicitly reported that this had an effect on the quality of their assessment (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'I think it's a kind of fatigue thing, by the time you get to [Explanations and Conclusions] (because I kind of do them in order of […] how it kind of looks), so that's […] usually my last section. And I think I've just got to the point where I've kind of had enough by then, so maybe it's about doing that bit first, but it logically flows to do that part last because you've kind of gathered all your information and you get to the bit where you think "right, okay, I've got all this information what are we going to do now". But, yeah, I've kind of usually had enough by then.' [INT15, YOT5]

3.4. External factors affected the extent to which AssetPlus was felt to support high-quality assessment

Some interviewees reported factors outside of the AssetPlus framework that affected the quality of assessment: including practitioners' existing skills, training received and timescales for completion. These are explored in more detail below.

Practitioners felt that the quality of assessment depended on the ability and skills of the practitioner doing the assessment

Several interviewees stated that, ultimately, the quality of assessment depended on the skills and experience of the assessor (the YOT practitioner) themselves (9 interviewees; 7 YOTs), leading a few to consider that AssetPlus had not had an effect on the quality of assessments (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'To me the AssetPlus is just a tool. It's the staff member that's the assessor.' [INT28, YOT7]

Some individuals felt that the quality of assessments could be affected by practitioners' prior experience of doing analysis (6 interviewees; 5 YOTs), which might depend on the nature of their previous roles (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), their age (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), and (according to a few managers) the length of time spent working in the YOT (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

While not explicitly discussed by interviewees, practitioners' experience of analysis and assessment within the AssetPlus framework more broadly was also influenced by the amount, quality and focus of the training received. Interviewees and survey respondents were both asked about the training they received on using AssetPlus, and some analysis of this is presented below.

Some interviewees considered that initial training did not sufficiently focus on how to write a high-quality assessment

Over half of interviewees – both managers and practitioners – considered that the initial training received on AssetPlus was inadequate (30 interviewees; 10 YOTs). A commonly reported issue at interview by both managers and practitioners was that initial training did not focus on how to write a good quality assessment, and instead focused on the practicalities of using the IT system (10 interviewees; 6 YOTs). This was also the case for at least some of the refresher training received by many interviewees (7 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

> 'That was the training at the beginning by the managers, it was brand new for everybody as well, so it was more about the kind of format of the actual new system as opposed to what the assessment was to look like. As time has gone on people have developed their own sort of ways […] doing it but this recent [top up] training has definitely […] helped.' [INT22, YOT2]

> 'We've had a whole Away Day on AssetPlus with managers and the thinking behind completing that was, actually, everybody had different expectations in terms of what should be where and how we were rating desistance factors. So what we did do was we were very clear and had raised all the questions, and we wanted an agreed practice standard across the YO[T], and then we translated that to whoever's training to make sure that there was consistency. Which seems to have worked quite well. It's a work in progress.' [INT46, YOT10]

As Table 3 demonstrates, while 58% (159/275) of survey respondents indicated that they felt they had received sufficient training on the difference between description and analysis, 8% (23/275) reported that they had not received training on this matter – a higher proportion than was the case for the other aspects of AssetPlus.[39]

Table 3: Survey respondents' feedback on whether they felt they had sufficient training on different aspects of AssetPlus

	Agreed that they had sufficient training		**Did not agree that they had sufficient training**		**Neither agreed nor disagreed that they had sufficient training**		**Did not have training on this area**	
	%age	Number	%age	Number	%age	Number	%age	Number
Concepts underlying AssetPlus	67%	183	15%	34	13%	37	6%	16
Understanding patterns of behaviour	63%	174	9%	75	21%	57	6%	17
How to successfully navigate the tool	63%	199	12%	34	21%	58	3%	8
Difference between analysis and description	58%	159	13%	35	20%	54	8%	23
n = 275								

Responses are arranged highest to lowest according to the percentage who agreed that they had sufficient training

Tight timescales for completing AssetPlus were also felt to affect the quality of assessments

A number of interviewees felt pressured by required timescales for completion of AssetPlus (11 interviewees; 8 YOTs). Interviewees recognised that these timescales were not a feature of AssetPlus.

[39] As Table 3 demonstrates, survey respondents were more positive than interviewees about the training they had received relating to AssetPlus. This may be because the survey questions did not specify initial training, but rather asked about general experiences of any relevant training, while interview questions were able to distinguish more subtly between initial training and top-up training.

Rather, they attributed the timescales to the 2013 national standards (YJB 2013b) that were in place at the time of interview (9 interviewees; 6 YOTs)40 and to court requirements (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

Some considered that these tight timescales could affect the quality of their assessment because they had little time to get to know the child, to gather information, and to conduct analysis (6 interviewees; 4 YOTs). Another interviewee was concerned that not completing AssetPlus assessments before children's court dates had a negative impact on the quality of information presented about a child in court (1 interviewee). Managers also reported some concern about assessments never being completed or closed, and sometimes having to set internal timelines to combat this (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'As I say, I think our biggest challenge is getting [AssetPlus assessments] done in a timely way. As soon as […] one is delayed and we're talking about capturing the moment, then even when it does come up for completion, things may have moved on. It's keeping on top of these assessments that's one of our biggest challenges, for the amount of young people that come through our doors.' [INT41, YOT8]

As the majority of interviewees attributed the tight timescales to the 2013 national standards (YJB 2013b), the 2019 national standards (YJB 2019a) – published in February 2019 and in effect from April 2019 – may go some of the way to resolving this problem, as these do not set such stringent targets regarding timescales.

3.5. There was considerable variation in perceptions of the usefulness of AssetPlus in formulating intervention plans

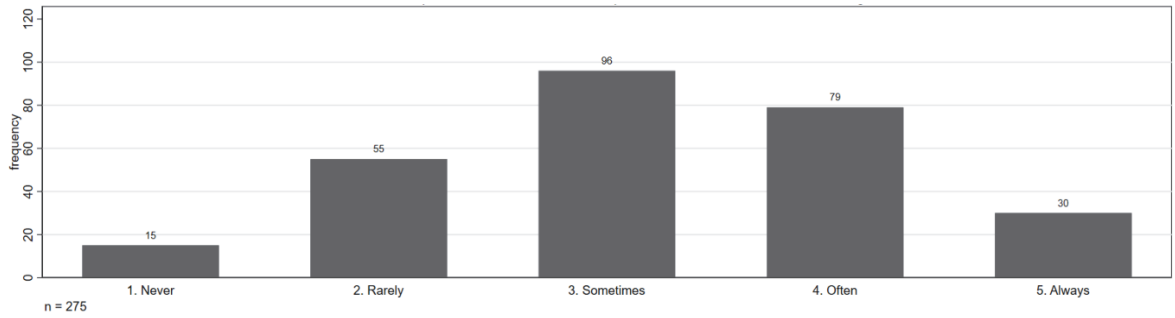
The majority of survey respondents reported that they sometimes found AssetPlus to be helpful when developing children's intervention plans

When asked whether AssetPlus helped them to make useful intervention plans for children who are at risk of offending, there was no clear pattern in the survey responses received (Figure 10). Similar numbers of practitioners who responded to the survey thought it was useful, not useful and sometimes useful:

- Around two fifths (40%, 109/275) of practitioners who responded to the survey considered that this was 'often' or 'always' the case.
- Around one third (30%, 96/275) of practitioners who responded to the survey stated that this was 'sometimes' the case.
- A quarter (25%, 70/275) considered that this was 'never' or 'rarely' the case.

[40] The *National Standards for Youth Justice Services* (2013) specified, for out of court disposals, that practitioners must undertake an assessment of a child within ten working days of referral by police. For interventions and reports, plans resulting from assessments must be completed within 15 days of beginning an assessment (YJB 2013b).

Figure 10: Based on your professional experience, please rate how much you agree with the following statement: AssetPlus helps me to make useful intervention plans for children who are at risk of offending (practitioners' response)



Findings in relation to the use of AssetPlus in intervention plans reflect the diversity of views among practitioners and the variation in use, and make drawing more general conclusions difficult. As seen in Table 4, similar questions on the survey produced different results: the majority agreed or strongly agreed that AssetPlus helped them make effective plans for children at risk of causing harm to others (63%, 172/275) and for children at risk of harm themselves (57%, 157/275).

Table 4: Practitioners' response to survey questions on the usefulness of AssetPlus in developing intervention plans for children at risk of causing or receiving harm

	AssetPlus helps me to make effective plans for children at risk of causing harm to others		**AssetPlus helps me to make effective plans for children at risk of harm themselves**	
	%age	**Number**	**%age**	**Number**
Strongly disagree	4%	9	4%	10
Disagree	11%	31	12%	33
Neither agree or disagree	23%	63	27%	75
Agree	55%	151	49%	134
Strongly agree	8%	21	8%	23
n = 275				

3.6. Features of AssetPlus that supported intervention planning

Interviewees' positive comments on intervention plans often related to elements aside from the Pathways and Planning section, such as the Information Gathering and Explanations and Conclusions sections.

Elements of AssetPlus that were felt to contribute to better intervention plans included:

- The overall focus on the child's strengths and pathways to desistance, which helped intervention plans to develop and reflect the whole child (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs). Survey responses show that 64% (202/275) of practitioners and 77% (69/89) of managers agreed or strongly agreed that AssetPlus helps them focus on the child's strengths and other desistance factors when making their intervention plan.

> 'I think the old Asset was excellent for highlighting issues. I think that it kind of centred around problems and highlighting the problems. I think that the AssetPlus has a different premise […] it's built around the Good Life model and centres around identifying the strengths of the family, which makes for a much more better-informed and achievable plan, just that automatically means your smart targets are a bit more likely to be achieved.' [INT24, YOT7]

- The self-assessment tool, which focused on the child's needs and encouraged the child's ownership of the plan (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).
- The Information Gathering section, because it prompted the consideration of multiple factors such as speech and language and substance misuse (1 interviewee).

Some considered that the Pathways and Planning section was useful because it required specificity about how and when targets will be achieved (1 interview) and because it included sections on children's learning styles and barriers to engagement with the YOT (1 interviewee). As addressed in section 2.8, some also considered that AssetPlus intervention plans promoted multi-agency working (4 interviewees; 2 YOTs), particularly with educational psychologists (1 interviewee).

> 'I never felt with Asset that it was as useful as I do with Asset Plus. It much more felt like something that just had to be done, whereas this does feel more necessary and more useful in planning and working [with] that young person.' [INT16, YOT5]

3.7. Concerns about the usefulness of AssetPlus for developing intervention plans

Over half the interviewees – both managers and practitioners – reported that they found it challenging to develop intervention plans within AssetPlus using the Pathways and Planning section (37 interviewees; 9 YOTs).

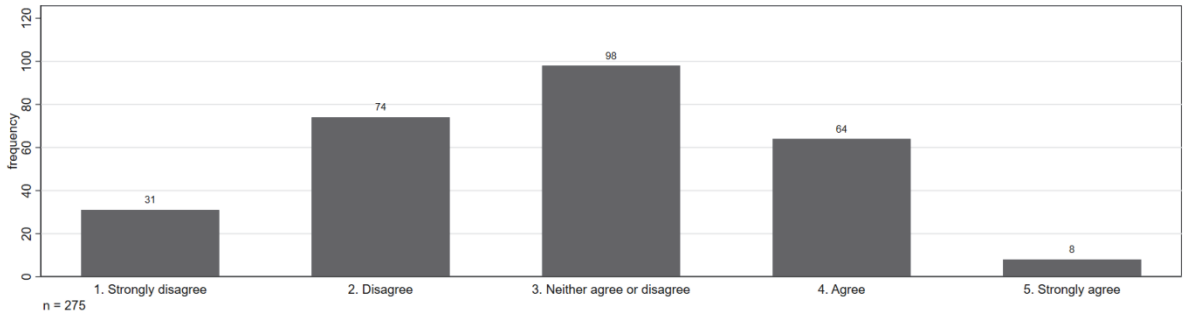
This contrasts to the results of the survey, presented in Figure 10, where approximately 70% of respondents indicated that they 'always', 'sometimes' or 'often' found AssetPlus helpful in developing intervention plans for children at risk of reoffending. However, as survey questions did not ask specifically about the Pathways and Planning sections of AssetPlus, but rather on the effect of the framework as a whole on the intervention plans they developed, this may explain the more positive responses captured by this data collection method. In contrast, interviewees were asked more specifically about their experience using the Pathways and Planning section in AssetPlus.

The survey findings suggested that there are a range of perceptions about whether using AssetPlus translates into better quality interventions (Figure 11):

- Over a third disagreed or strongly disagreed that using AssetPlus makes a difference to the quality of interventions and services that are provided to children (37%, 105/275).

- Just over a third (35%, 98/275) did not agree or disagree.
- A quarter (25%, 72/275) agreed or strongly agreed that AssetPlus did make a difference.

Figure 11: Practitioners' response to survey question about effect of AssetPlus on quality of interventions and services provided to children



The Pathways and Planning section was not perceived to be child- or user-friendly

Just over a third of interviewees – both managers and practitioners – commented that the intervention planning section was not child-friendly (20 interviewees; 9 YOTs). This sentiment was also echoed by survey respondents in open-text responses.[41] Reported issues included: the section's length (8 interviewees; 6 YOTs); the section's complexity (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs); the difficulty and child-un-friendliness of the language (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs); and the excessive number of targets (1 interviewee). This affected the usefulness of the intervention plan: as a result, the plan was sometimes considered too long to print out and use with a child (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs).[42]

> 'I do think the intervention plan isn't really fit for purpose. I think it's quite convoluted and there's too much to it. It doesn't lend itself, if you were to print that off for a child, it would be 30 pages long. I think that particular aspect of it is quite poor.' [INT41, YOT8]

> 'I think the language that you have to use in the boxes [is] difficult for young people to follow. Whereas if you do it on a flipchart and then a piece of paper and you write [a] contract and it's all about outcomes, "So I want to feel happier. How are you going to feel happier? Well I'm going to start going to school more, or whatever". […] and so [we are] doing it that way and then we're going to upload it [to AssetPlus].' [INT34, YOT3]

Interviewees also considered the Pathways and Planning section of AssetPlus user-unfriendly, which affected the quality of intervention plans produced (13 interviewees; 6 YOTs).[43] The reasons given overlapped considerably with the reasons why practitioners experienced difficulty navigating the AssetPlus

[41] In response to an open-text question inviting final thoughts on AssetPlus: 18 out of 218 survey respondents to this question expressed this view.

[42] In response to an open-text question inviting final thoughts on AssetPlus: 8 out of 218 survey respondents to this question expressed this view.

[43] In response to an open-text question inviting comments on navigation within AssetPlus: 16 out of 146 survey responses to this question expressed this view. In response to an open-text question inviting final thoughts on AssetPlus: 7 out of 218 survey respondents to this question expressed this view.

framework (as explored in section 2.3) and using AssetPlus for assessment (as explored in section 3.3). As mentioned in both previous sections, the intervention planning section was reportedly difficult to navigate because of the many separate boxes to complete (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'It doesn't seem to flow very well, and you can't see the entirety fully if you're completing it all. I find it difficult to remember what I put for the objective for number one, [when] I'm at [objective] number four. Because then I have to go back up and open it and then read what I've done.' [INT31, YOT6]

A few interviewees felt that the Pathways and Planning section was too long (7 interviewees; 5 YOTs), which caused some interviewees to 'lose steam' and motivation throughout the process (5 interviewees; 4 YOTs). Others reported that the section was often completed only as an afterthought and without sufficient detail (4 interviewees; 2 YOTs); that they felt it was disjointed from the other sections and struggled to see how it related to the information that was collected (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs); that information from other sections of AssetPlus was not always pulled through to the planning section (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs); and that it was repetitive (1 interviewee).

> 'But, I think […] people have lost the will to live by the time they get [to] Pathway and Plan[ning]. So, all you see is a stock line talking about, "if this happens the risk increases and, conversely, if the opposite happens it decreases". There's no quality to it and no talking about the strategies to keep people safe. So, something has got lost in translation and it's never taken off.' [INT39, YOT3]

The Pathways and Planning section was also rated the most difficult to use by 40% of all survey respondents (110/275). 50% of survey respondents who were asked (133/267) also disagreed or strongly disagreed that AssetPlus was, in their experience, time-efficient for intervention planning. When managers were asked the same question, they were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree that AssetPlus was time-efficient (75%, 67/89).

3.8. Most interviewees reported their YOT had created alternative intervention plans

More than half of all interviewees – both managers and practitioners – reported that they are no longer using the Pathways and Planning section to develop intervention plans, and have developed their own alternatives (31 interviewees; 9 YOTs).

Of these, a number reported that they are developing plans that are, in their view, clearer, more concise, and easier for a child to understand, with more child-friendly and simple language (7 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Sometimes, alternative intervention plans might be developed together with the child and their family, sometimes using flipcharts (7 interviewees; 5 YOTs), which, some felt, ensured that plans were more centred around the child and their needs (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Additional survey responses left by respondents also indicate that other YOTs (not visited for this study) may also be devising their own intervention plans in order to make them more child-friendly.[44]

[44] In response to an open-text question inviting final thoughts on AssetPlus: 4 out of 218 survey respondents to this question expressed this view.

A few interviewees and survey respondents had more innovative ideas around future intervention plans:

- Plans developed on smartphone apps that have a significant visual and interactive element (1 interviewee).
- A grid system for organising the interventions, which would make it easier to follow and quicker to complete.
- The incorporation of the restorative justice module into the Pathways and Planning section.[45]

[45] In response to an open-text question inviting comments on navigation within AssetPlus: suggestions made by 3 out of 146 survey responses to this question.

4. How AssetPlus is being used in developing pre-sentence reports

Key findings

- AssetPlus is used in a variety of ways by practitioners writing pre-sentence reports.
- There are differences in the order in which practitioners complete AssetPlus and PSRs.
- The different purposes of PSRs and AssetPlus assessments limited the perceived usefulness of the PSR module, which required substantial editing.
- There are some challenges with information not pulling through to the PSR module.
- The majority of survey respondents reported that AssetPlus was not time-efficient for writing PSRs.

Pre-sentence reports (PSRs) are prepared by a YOT practitioner to inform the court about the most suitable sentencing option for a child. These reports must include an assessment of the nature and seriousness of the child's offence, its impact on the victim, and relevant information about the child's personal, family and social circumstances. The intended effect of AssetPlus on PSRs was twofold:

- The introduction of a PSR module on AssetPlus was intended to improve operational efficiencies, by facilitating the extraction of information from AssetPlus into a draft PSR template, which could then be edited by a practitioner before submission to court (YJB 2016).
- As the introduction of AssetPlus was intended to lead to higher quality assessments, it was also intended to lead to higher quality PSRs.

This chapter addresses research question 5 (how AssetPlus has been used in pre-sentence reports). In this evaluation, it has not been possible to make any judgements about changes in the content of actual PSRs. Instead this chapter focuses on practitioners' experiences of using AssetPlus to develop pre-sentence reports.

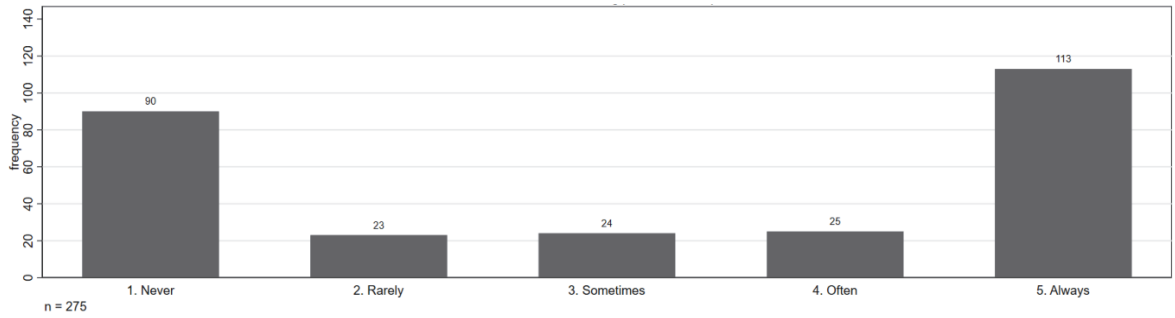
4.1. AssetPlus was used in a variety of ways by practitioners writing PSRs

As demonstrated in Figure 12, around a third of survey respondents (33%, 90/275) said that they 'never' used AssetPlus for writing PSRs, while only slightly more (41%, 113/275) reported that they 'always' did.

Analysing these results is difficult, due to the different possible interpretations of how AssetPlus might be 'used' to write pre-sentence reports. While some respondents may have interpreted the question in terms

of using information and analysis in AssetPlus to inform the content of PSRs, others may have answered while considering use of the specific PSR module that is available on AssetPlus.

Figure 12: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I use AssetPlus for writing pre-sentence reports (practitioners' response)



A similar split was seen in the reported views of interviewees, over half of whom mentioned PSRs (31 interviewees, 9 YOTs). Of these, just under half indicated that they and their colleagues used the PSR module on AssetPlus (13 interviewees; 6 YOTs). A similar number of these interviewees, however, reported that they and their colleagues did not use this module (18 interviewees; 7 YOTs). Of these, a few interviewees from three YOTs reported conflicting practices regarding use of the PSR module within their team.

There were differences in the order in which practitioners complete AssetPlus and PSRs

When the AssetPlus model was developed, it was envisaged that practitioners would complete the assessment on AssetPlus first, and then use this as the basis for completing a PSR (YJB 2016).

However, interviews suggest that some practitioners instead complete a PSR before finishing an assessment on AssetPlus (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Reasons why included personal preferences (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), necessity due to tight timescales for producing PSRs (1 interviewee), and practice culture in particular teams (1 scoping interviewee).

> 'You know, quite often, you write the PSR because you've got to get it done […] and I know that I've copied and pasted PSRs into AssetPlus, it goes the other way quite often. It's like, it isn't meant to be like that but it's just to […] keep your head above water sometimes.' [INT56, YOT9]

Other interviewees did not report the point at which they created a PSR. However, one expressed a positive view of completing AssetPlus first, which helped with producing a PSR:

> '…The thing I like about [the PSR module on AssetPlus] is it makes you do a thorough assessment of that young person. Because before, we used to cheat and do the PSR first […] and think, "oh, I'll do the Asset after". Well, I like this because it makes sense to do the AssetPlus first, [because] you know you're going to hit that magic button and it fills it for you, to an extent […] we've already done it.' [INT3, YOT1]

Some YOTs have developed their own templates for writing PSRs.

Rather than using the PSR module, a number of practitioners reported using templates developed by their YOT and then copying or re-writing information from AssetPlus into a draft PSR (6 interviewees; 3

YOTs). This may contribute to an increased workload, because additional cutting and pasting was required (1 interviewee).

4.2. Practitioners reported challenges in using AssetPlus to develop PSRs

Different purposes of AssetPlus and PSR

Some practitioners reported that taking information directly from AssetPlus (through the PSR module) and inputting it in their PSR was not helpful, because of their different purposes (7 interviewees; 7 YOTs). The focus, language, and writing style of a PSR were, necessarily, different from those of AssetPlus assessments. Some felt that information in AssetPlus was more detailed than was ideal for a PSR (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs, 1 scoping interviewee). A few noted differences that included a perception that a PSR required the voice of an author to come through (1 interviewee) and a more professional and methodological tone (1 interviewee). Other interviewees, however, reported that they tried to adapt how they wrote assessments on AssetPlus in order to better facilitate writing PSRs (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

> 'So, it would be lovely, if there would ever be a time where you could pre-populate [the pre-sentence report] and everything would make sense and flow, but I think there will always be an issue with that, won't there? When you're report writing, it's the voice of the author, isn't it, that goes through it?' [INT41, YOT8]

Substantial editing required

As a result of the different purposes of AssetPlus and PSRs, practitioners reported some challenges in using material generated by the PSR module (7 interviewees; 6 YOTs). A few practitioners reported that information pulled through was excessive, unhelpful or irrelevant (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs) or of poor quality (1 interviewee). Others expressed that reports generated in this way simply did not flow, so required substantial editing before being given to the court (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). Another reported that they did not use the PSR module because the court staff did not like the new style of PSR that AssetPlus generated, although further detail as to why was not given (1 interviewee).

> 'Whereas what comes out of AssetPlus is quite […] nondescript. It just seems to grab bits from all over the place and it's okay for people to say "Oh well, you can edit it." Well, why would I want to write a load of information in a system and then press 'Generate Report'? It generates a report, and I've got to spend ages rewording it and changing it, when I can just write it properly as a professional document in the first instance.' [INT28, YOT7]

Information not pulling through

A few individuals reported that some important information did not pull through to the report generated by the PSR module (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs),[46] including, in one case, information about a child's risk

[46] In response to an open-text question about navigation within AssetPlus: 2 out of the 146 who responded to that question expressed this view.

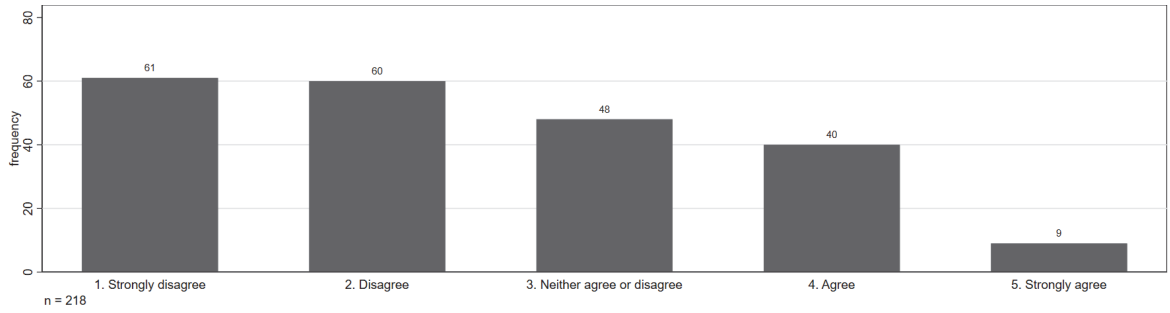
and safety and well-being (1 interviewee). While this is likely to be a problem at the IT system level, rather than with the designed framework itself, it has nonetheless influenced how practitioners use AssetPlus for PSRs.

4.3. The majority of survey respondents felt that AssetPlus was not time-efficient for writing PSRs

Not surprisingly perhaps, in view of some of the challenges recorded when using the PSR module, 56% (121/218) of survey respondents disagreed with the statement that AssetPlus was time-efficient in relation to writing PSRs: suggesting that they felt the amount of time required was not justified by the outcome. Fewer numbers of practitioners neither agreed nor disagreed (22%, 48/218) with this statement, or agreed (22%, 49/218) with this statement. However, there also remains the possibility that survey respondents interpreted this question differently, contributing to potentially different responses depending on whether they referred to the time-efficiency of the PSR module on AssetPlus or the time-efficiency of the process of using material within AssetPlus to develop PSRs.

While not a question asked at interview, one interviewee did report that they found that the PSR module was time-efficient, reporting an occasion upon which they were able to use the PSR module to develop a report in half an hour for a case they did not previously know (1 interviewee).

Figure 13: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I find AssetPlus time-efficient for writing pre-sentence reports (practitioners' response)



5. The impact of AssetPlus upon YOT communication with the secure estate

Key findings

- Practitioners reported difficulties in sharing AssetPlus with the secure estate, as full functionality is not yet available.
- Some confusion prevails about the roles and responsibilities of YOT practitioners and staff from – secure establishments regarding keeping AssetPlus up to date.
- YOT practitioners felt that staff from the secure estate did not always complete AssetPlus assessments and plans (or did so to a poor quality).
- As a result, there appears to be limited joint working between YOT practitioners and staff from the secure estate regarding assessments and planning.

Prior to AssetPlus, communication between community services (i.e. YOTs) and the secure estate had been identified as a concern. A thematic report on resettlement services found that 'information sharing was inconsistent both within and between organisations', leading to very few children being reassessed before leaving custody and little work being done 'to work out whom, if anyone, was at risk of being harmed and what needed to be in place to manage that risk and protect potential victims' (HMIP 2015, 18).

The *AssetPlus Joint Working Protocol* sets out how AssetPlus should work in terms of enabling the transfer of high-quality information between YOTs and the secure estate. Key features to note are that AssetPlus is designed to be used 'end-to-end' across the youth justice system (by accompanying children as they enter the secure estate and then return to the community), and to 'provide an up-to-date record of assessed strengths, risks and needs, and the interventions in place' (HMPPS & YJB 2018). The *Protocol* states that while the secure estate is responsible for updating AssetPlus for a child in custody, YOTs retain overall case management responsibilities and should liaise with the secure estate regarding updating assessment and intervention plans.

It is also important to note differences within the youth secure estate. While Secure Children's Homes (SCHs) and Secure Training Centres (STCs) use the Youth Justice Application Framework (YJAF) (through which AssetPlus is shared) as their primary case management system, Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) use the Prison National Offender Management System (p-NOMIS) to record data about a child in custody. Therefore, for YOIs, YJAF is an additional system, leading to possible variations in how far different types of secure establishments engage with AssetPlus.

This chapter addresses research question 6 (how the implementation and delivery of AssetPlus has impacted transitions from the SE to the community). Although the question focused specifically on transitions *from* the secure estate to the community, interview and survey respondents also discussed their experiences passing information *to* the secure estate. This chapter therefore looks at the experiences of YOT practitioners relating to the sharing of information between YOTs and the secure estate. Readers are reminded that this study did not involve consultation with representatives from the secure estate.

5.1. There were considerable challenges in sharing AssetPlus with the secure estate

Whilst acknowledging that the secure estate has had much less time than YOTs to adjust to the new framework,[47] the perceptions and experiences of YOT practitioners suggest that the process of information sharing is currently problematic. This in turn means that the assessment and planning process for children in custody is not working as well as it should, with the result that transitions between custody and community (and vice versa) may be more difficult than originally envisaged.

Some functionality issues impeded practitioners' ability to send AssetPlus to the secure estate

When a child goes into custody, the YOT transfers information from the AssetPlus custody module to the Youth Custody Services Placements Team, who will then pass information on to the secure establishment to which the child has been sent. Staff from secure establishments are then expected to complete the Entering Custody module on YJAF.

However, some interviewees reported that it was not possible to send an AssetPlus to the Placements Team unless all parts were completed (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). In these cases, small details (such as the name of the child's GP not being completed or the inclusion of a speech mark or exclamation mark) could prevent an AssetPlus being transferred (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). This was a particular problem when a child was remanded in custody only a few hours after meeting a YOT worker, meaning they did not yet have a full AssetPlus that could be easily transferred (1 interviewee).

A few reported that a 'larger' AssetPlus (i.e. those pertaining to more complex cases that held a lot of information) could sometimes not be sent via YJAF at all, meaning secure email had to be used instead (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). Other practitioners noted that the prohibition on faxing such documents (YJB 2016) was inconvenient (3 interviewees; 2 YOTs).

Receiving information from the secure estate was difficult

At the time of writing, full connectivity between YOTs' IT systems and the secure estate's YJAF has not yet been achieved. As a result, the secure estate is unable to transfer AssetPlus directly back to the YOT.

[47] AssetPlus was rolled out in the secure estate throughout 2018, after roll-out had already concluded in YOTs (2015–2017). See section 1.2 for more information.

Instead, in order to see assessment updates made by staff within the secure estate for a child in custody or to make any necessary changes to the risk ratings, YOT practitioners are required to log in to the YJAF. As noted in section 1.2, the final phase of YJAF development (scheduled for autumn 2019) is expected to bring significant improvements to connectivity.

At interview, some practitioners reported difficulties in using the YJAF in order to view AssetPlus assessments and plans (8 interviewees; 5 YOTs). Some found that downloading information from YJAF was cumbersome, convoluted and time-consuming (6 interviewees; 4 YOTs). In some cases, this was because information could not be imported directly from YJAF, but instead had to be downloaded or sent as a PDF document and then entered manually into a new AssetPlus (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'I still think [AssetPlus being used for transitions between the secure estate and community] is very much a work in progress, isn't it? The whole idea was that the assessments were meant to flow freely between the various systems and obviously these don't, we're still getting assessments come through as PDF documents generated by the [YJAF] system.' [INT19, YOT2]

This sometimes led to the duplication of AssetPlus assessments and plans across areas and between YOTs and secure estates (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs) – despite the stated aim that AssetPlus would reduce duplication (YJB 2013a).

> 'You could end up opening about…I think we worked out, it was six AssetPlus' in the space of three days for one young person going into custody, just because the system doesn't allow [YOTs and secure establishments] to speak to each other properly.' [INT28, YOT7]

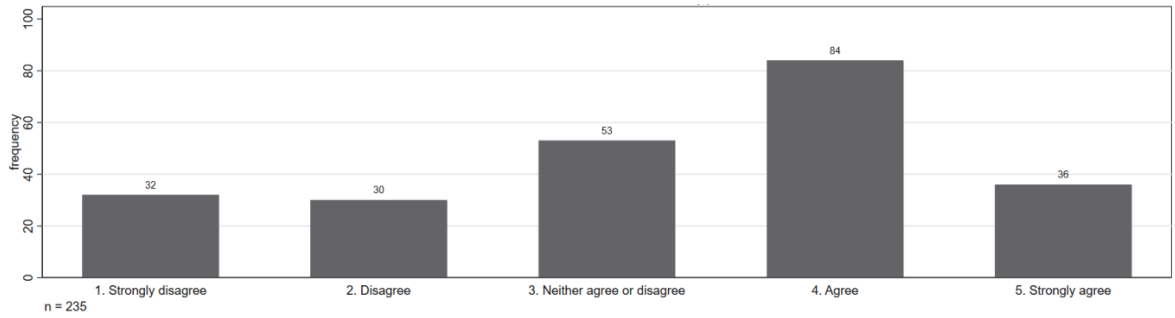
A few reported problems receiving alerts that AssetPlus assessments and plans had been uploaded to YJAF by the secure estate: email alerts were not always received (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), went only to one member of the team, or did not contain any identifying detail for the child in question (1 interviewee). As a result, such information was easy to miss and difficult to track.

Survey respondents expressed a range of views about the time efficiency of using AssetPlus for youth custody placements

Analysis of the survey responses about the time efficiency of using AssetPlus for youth custody placements shows a mixed picture (Figure 14). While just under half of respondents to this question (44%, 120/275) either agreed or strongly agreed that AssetPlus was time-efficient for youth custody placements, almost a quarter (23%, 62/275) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and around a fifth (19%, 53/275) neither agreed nor disagreed. Responses did not vary considerably when disaggregated by IT system. While the majority view was positive, the spread of the responses suggests very varying experiences of the use of this part of AssetPlus.

The variety in views may also reflect the variety in youth custody rates across the country, which would mean that different practitioners had different levels of experience in using the AssetPlus tool to communicate with the secure estate. A few interviewees reported that they had limited experience of communicating with the secure estate about AssetPlus because custody rates among their caseload were low (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs).

Figure 14: Please rate how much you agree with the following statement: I find AssetPlus time-efficient for youth custody placements (practitioners' response)



5.2. Use of AssetPlus while a child is in custody

Unless agreed otherwise, guidance on the use of AssetPlus assigns responsibility for updating AssetPlus following custodial planning and review meetings to the secure establishment. This is because the child is in their care and they are best-placed to a) understand what intervention resources are available; and b) comment on progress against targets and objectives (YJB 2018). Updates made by staff in the secure estate should therefore reflect the child's behaviour and progress in custody.

However, YOTs retain overall case management responsibility for a child in custody, and are also responsible for adjusting the overall risk ratings when required (likelihood of reoffending, risk of serious harm, or safety and well-being – factors that cannot be altered by staff in secure establishments). A YOT practitioner might also make changes on the basis of new information received. The YOT should always notify the secure establishment of any such changes (YJB 2018). According to the *Joint Working Protocol*, 'ongoing dialogue between those involved should take place throughout the custodial period to support effective assessment, planning and the delivery of interventions' (HMPPS & YJB 2018).

Confusion about roles and responsibilities in keeping AssetPlus up to date

A few interviewees reported some confusion and uncertainty about where responsibilities for updating AssetPlus lay between YOTs and the secure estate. A few YOT practitioners reported that they reminded staff in the secure estate to complete AssetPlus (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), while others reported that they continued with their own reviews instead (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). One suggested that the 'perpetual loop' of AssetPlus transferrals between the secure estate and YOT practitioners had contributed to this confusion (1 interviewee).

There was also some uncertainty about what sort of connectivity was meant to be in place. A couple of interviewees reported being unaware that the secure estate was able to see or edit AssetPlus at all (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), while others expressed uncertainty about the role that staff in secure establishments were meant to play in updating AssetPlus assessments and plans (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Some expressed frustration that the promised improvements in technical capabilities had not been delivered (4 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'A lot of the IT benefits that were sold […] have never really materialised. So, if they go into the custody, [the idea was that] a custodial facility will update the AssetPlus and then it will get sent back to the YOT: a lot of that just never really properly materialised. The IT just wasn't in place to do that.' [INT19, YOT2]

AssetPlus was often not completed by staff in the secure estate

Some practitioners reported that in their experience, staff in secure establishments did not always consult or update AssetPlus while a child was in their custody (9 interviewees; 6 YOTs). Of these, a few also expressed concerns about the quality of updates made by secure-estate staff (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs). Concerns included a lack of detail in intervention plans (1 interviewee) and a perceived focus on describing well-being initiatives, at the expense of completing a more rounded and comprehensive analysis and plan (1 interviewee).

> '[The secure establishment] sent [an AssetPlus] over and all the sections were blank. It was basically the AssetPlus that we sent when [the child] initially went [into custody], it was basically that and a little bit tweaked.' [INT3, YOT1]

A few considered that this was the result of problems faced by secure-estate staff when using YJAF to access AssetPlus (4 interviewees; 4 YOTs), possibly exacerbated by insufficient training on using the YJAF provided to staff in the secure estate (1 interviewee). One interviewee reported that difficulty using the portal meant that, in their experience, one secure establishment simply did not use AssetPlus (1 interviewee). A couple felt that the size of AssetPlus meant that staff in the secure estate did not read existing assessments and plans (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs), but rather consulted pre-sentence reports which were shorter and more concise (1 interviewee) – a problem found more widely when sharing AssetPlus reports with other agencies, as is explored in section 2.8.

5.3. The impression is one of limited joint working on assessments between the secure estate and YOTs

A couple of interviewees described the secure estate as operating quite separately from the YOT in relation to assessing and planning for children in custody (2 interviewees; 2 YOTs). When more cohesive working with a local secure establishment was described, this usually involved face-to-face conversations and phone calls rather than any systematic use of AssetPlus or YJAF (3 interviewees; 3 YOTs).

> 'I've just recently had a young person in custody and [the secure establishment staff] were using AssetPlus but I don't have regular experience with it, I think that was more of a logging on issue to be honest but they were updating it from their end and I was doing my minimal updates and we didn't really do anything together as such.' [INT22, YOT2]

Many of the issues discussed in this chapter relate to the current technical limitations affecting the transfer of information and, as noted in section 5.1, the forthcoming implementation of Phase III of YJAF should lead to improvements in this area. This may, in turn, facilitate closer working between YOTs and the secure estate in future.

6. The impact of AssetPlus on broader outcomes (including FTEs, reoffending, remands into custody and other outcomes)

Key findings

- There is very limited evidence on the impact of AssetPlus on children's other outcomes, FTEs, reoffending and remands into custody.
- Most practitioners did not consider that AssetPlus has had an impact on the likelihood of reoffending or remand into custody.
- Future research into these questions should be informed by articulating in more detail the mechanisms through which AssetPlus might be expected to lead to better outcomes for children.

Improvements in assessment quality and intervention planning as a result of the introduction of AssetPlus were hoped to lead to better targeted and more individualised services being provided to children. In turn, this was expected to lead to a reduction in the number of first-time entrants, reductions in remands into custody and reductions in the frequency and seriousness of reoffending (YJB 2013a).[48]

While the impact of AssetPlus upon FTEs, reoffending, remands in custody and other outcomes was a topic explored in the survey questions, it was not an area upon which interviewees felt able to comment. There is a separate ongoing outcomes evaluation planned on the effect of AssetPlus on these outcomes.

This chapter presents, briefly, information gathered in the survey pertaining to research question 7 (how AssetPlus has affected FTEs, re/offending, remands into custody and other outcomes for children).

6.1. Most respondents did not consider that AssetPlus had an impact on reoffending

Over two thirds (69%, 251/364) of survey respondents (both managers and practitioners) felt that there was 'no change' when describing the impact of AssetPlus on reoffending. Only 6% (20/364) reported that they thought AssetPlus actually increased the likelihood of reoffending, while 26% (93/364) reported that they felt AssetPlus decreased the likelihood of reoffending.

[48] However, to our knowledge, a full theory of change that connects AssetPlus to such outcomes has not been developed.

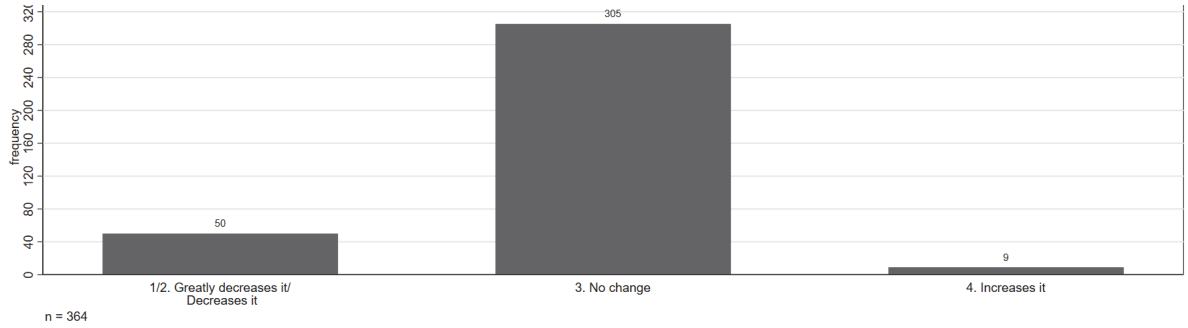
It should be recalled that, as presented in section 3.5, only a minority of survey respondents (25%, 72/275) considered that AssetPlus had any effect on the interventions and services provided to children (Figure 11). It is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of respondents did not consider that AssetPlus was able to have this effect on either reoffending or remands into custody.

Managers were more optimistic than practitioners about the impact of AssetPlus on the likelihood of reoffending and of remands into custody. Nearly half of the managers surveyed (46%, 41/89) considered that the tool reduces the likelihood of reoffending of children, compared to just 18% (42/235) of practitioners. Similarly, more than one in five managers (21%, 19/89) considered that AssetPlus reduces the custody remand of children, compared to 12% (27/235) of practitioners. It is unclear why this is the case.

6.2. AssetPlus is not thought to affect rates of remand into custody

An even higher proportion of practitioners and managers (84%, 305/364) felt that AssetPlus did not affect the chance of remand into custody. Only 2% (9/364) suggested that AssetPlus increased the likelihood of a child being remanded into custody, while 14% (50/364) thought it had decreased or greatly decreased this likelihood (Figure 15).

Figure 15: In your view, what is the impact of AssetPlus on the remand in custody of children? (practitioners' and managers' response)[49]



[49] Answers have been aggregated to avoid disclosure where there were fewer than 5 respondents.

7. Conclusions

This report has presented findings from an independent study into practitioners' experiences and perceptions of AssetPlus. Based on interviews with and survey responses from YOT practitioners across England and Wales, it has explored experiences and perceptions of the impact of AssetPlus on a wide range of elements within the youth justice world, as set out in seven research questions.

In this final chapter, we draw together some cross-cutting themes and conclusions that have emerged from our study.

Working with and assessing children involved in the youth justice system is immensely challenging. They may have many difficulties in their lives and may be involved with a number of different statutory services. As such, the skills and time that are required to build sufficient levels of trust and cooperation to facilitate assessment and planning (using any assessment tool) should not be underestimated, and our conclusions should be read in this context.

Alongside this, disentangling practitioners' perceptions and experiences of AssetPlus from other changes and trends in the youth justice sector since its introduction is very difficult. Other contextual factors have affected working practices, roles and responsibilities, operational efficiencies, communication with the secure estate, and the content and quality of assessment, pre-sentence reports and intervention plans. For example, the introduction of AssetPlus coincided with a significant fall in YOT caseloads, driven in part by large reductions in first-time entrants (Sutherland et al. 2017) and a concurrent increase in the proportion of children in the justice system with complex needs (HMIP 2017).

There was considerable variation in practitioners' views about and use of AssetPlus. This variation is mainly at an individual level (although there is some variation between YOTs and according to the IT systems used). In many instances the practitioners participating in our study reported quite different practices in how and when AssetPlus was used in developing assessments, intervention planning, pre-sentence reports, and transfers to the secure estate. There were differing opinions and experiences about the relative usefulness of different elements of AssetPlus, and of AssetPlus as a whole. There was also variation in practitioners' knowledge of assessment processes, and some evidence that practitioners sometimes misunderstood how to use elements within AssetPlus or were unaware of the relevant guidance.

In general, practitioners thought that the ideas and theory behind AssetPlus were strong. Practitioners considered that the extensive information-gathering that AssetPlus encouraged, the focus on analysis, and the focus on a child's strengths and pathways to desistance were positive developments that, in theory, led to better assessments of children. Practitioners considered that AssetPlus

had some positive effects on their practice. The majority reported that they felt able to use their professional judgement in relation to assessing a child's future behaviour and risks. In addition, the idea of a seamless framework that integrated assessment, intervention plans, pre-sentence reports, communication between YOTs and communication with the secure estate was welcomed.

Some aspects of the design of AssetPlus were perceived as making it difficult to use in practice. Practitioners frequently reported that the tool as implemented was difficult to use easily and intuitively because it was very long, had many boxes, required detailed and specific information, was difficult to navigate and was occasionally confusing or unclear in terms of language and what was required. This left some with the perception that the process was repetitive or required duplication of material. The variety of functions that the tool encompassed means that the information entered necessarily leads to a long document. The separation of analysis and description between sections was felt to be counter-intuitive by some practitioners, while others did not like the non-linear nature of the tool, or felt that the analysis was too disjointed and did not 'flow' naturally.

There was uncertainty about the distinction between description and analysis in the assessment process. Many managers and senior practitioners had a clear idea of what a good assessment was. However, it seems that the critical element of *analysis* was not straightforward for practitioners. Our view is that many practitioners struggled to separate the information-gathering and analysis stages; they had a tendency to begin analysing and drawing inferences during the data-collection stage, entering details in the Information Gathering section of AssetPlus that might be best placed in the Explanations and Conclusions section. This may have contributed to a feeling of repetition (if what should be 'analysis' has already been written elsewhere in the assessment).

The majority of practitioners reported that using AssetPlus took up a large amount of time. Practitioners did not feel that using AssetPlus was always an efficient use of time as they did not always consider their assessments to be improved as a result of using AssetPlus. Concerns about the length of the assessment process were compounded by problems with functionality and connectivity, which meant that AssetPlus could not be easily shared between YOTs, with the secure estate or with other agencies. Intended time-efficient features of AssetPlus (such as the development of the pre-sentence module) were in fact difficult to use.

Practitioners were not always certain about their roles, responsibilities and the scope for 'light touch' assessment. Confusion was reported over the roles and responsibilities of YOT practitioners and staff in the secure estate when updating AssetPlus for children in custody. Many practitioners also reported lacking confidence and being unsure about when 'lighter touch' AssetPlus assessments could be completed for children with whom they may have little interaction in the future. As a result, many practitioners reported completing assessments of the same length and detail for these cases as for cases that are highly complex, which they considered to be overly laborious with little perceived benefit. Reasons for this included perceived pressure from managers, the inspectorate and the YJB, fear of missing information that was later revealed to be important, difficulty understanding how to best use the tool in this 'light touch' way, and some misconceptions about the extent of personal and YOT-level autonomy that exists.

Some YOTs appear to be requiring practices and procedures around AssetPlus that go beyond what is required by the YJB. For example, it seems that some YOTs require managers to countersign all AssetPlus assessments at both initial and review stages, despite this being a matter where YOTs can exercise some discretion. This may have been due to some uncertainty in interpreting the requirements of the 2013 national standards (YJB 2013b) that were in place at the time of this evaluation. Managers who carried out quality assurance also often expected reviews of AssetPlus to be comprehensive, even if only a few details had changed (which may be compounded by difficulties seeing what has changed in an assessment due to the IT system). As a result, such requirements might sometimes have increased the time that practitioners spend on AssetPlus beyond what is strictly required. However, the new 2019 national standards (YJB 2019a) allow for much greater flexibility in practice, which may reduce these problems in future.

IT systems, while out of the scope of this evaluation, play a central role in the everyday use and 'usability' of AssetPlus. Many of the issues above were also compounded by the various IT systems used by YOTs for AssetPlus. User interfaces have considerable effect over how AssetPlus appears as a tool, how it is navigated and how assessments and intervention plans can be shared between YOTs and other establishments. Evidence from this study suggests that these interfaces are not user-friendly or simple to navigate, leading to more time spent on the tool than is perhaps necessary. The IT systems therefore have unavoidable effects on how practitioners experience and perceive the AssetPlus framework. In particular, every YOT visited for interviews reported having to create their own version of the intervention plan because, as implemented, the IT versions of this were not fit for purpose (i.e. sharing with a child and their family).

YOTs are being innovative in response to the challenges of using AssetPlus. When 'light touch' assessments were made, these were often solutions found outside of AssetPlus rather than an adaptation of AssetPlus itself. Almost all the YOTs who were visited for interviews were developing alternative intervention plans (and occasionally, self-assessments) that were designed to enable and prompt more interaction and dialogue with children and their families. Some YOTs reported developing internal guidance on areas such as quality assurance, or having individuals with considerable amounts of AssetPlus-related knowledge who could support staff and teach others how to navigate the tool, what to avoid, and how to improve the experience of using AssetPlus. A number of YOTs had also organised top-up training on particular areas identified for improvement, including navigation of the tool and understanding of assessment.

The considerable practical challenges of using AssetPlus in busy everyday practice meant that the full benefits have not yet been fully realised. As currently designed, AssetPlus has multiple purposes (including case management, assessment, risk prediction, intervention planning, information sharing), which partly explains why it seems long and complex. Having a comprehensive framework is not necessarily a problem if practitioners feel that the time spent on it is justified by the benefits it provides. At the moment, however, it seems that many youth justice practitioners do not feel that this is the case, even if they support the holistic, strengths-based approach that underlies AssetPlus.

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