

29 March 2022

Mr R. Guy Davies  
Assistant Coroner  
Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly Coroner's Area  
By email: [cornwallcoroner@cornwall.gov.uk](mailto:cornwallcoroner@cornwall.gov.uk)

Dear Mr Davies

**Regulation 28 Prevention of Future Deaths letter**  
**Re: Jake Adam Cahill, deceased**

Thank you for your letter of 1 February outlining your decision to issue a report to prevent future deaths following the inquest into the death of Jake Cahill. As a mother of young teenage boys, I read your report with profound sadness at the tragedy of Jake's death and wish to extend my most sincere condolences to Jake's family and friends for their unimaginable loss.

We accept your recommendation that the Youth Justice Board (YJB);

*'reviews the guidance and procedures relating to the distribution and completion of the self-assessment form [AssetPlus] given to young persons'*

In addition, I wish to assure you that the Youth Justice Board (YJB) has reviewed your conclusions fully and is committed always to engage with findings of investigations such as yours to ensure that where there is direct or indirect learning for the youth justice system, we can act upon this to promote continuous learning and support the prevention of harm.

As an independent public body appointed by the Secretary of State, we have a statutory responsibility to oversee the whole of the youth justice system. Through the consolidation of our statutory functions, we support youth justice services to coordinate and deliver the provision of youth justice services.

The YJB's leadership of the system also places us in a unique position of being able to triangulate learning from the investigations of others with our own assessments and understanding of the system we lead.

We fully recognise the importance of considered and appropriate engagement with children throughout the youth justice system. With this in mind we have to find the balance between issuing central direction and guidance, and supporting practitioners to exercise professional judgement in order to encourage the skills and knowledge that support direct work with children. AssetPlus itself is an assessment and interventions framework that focuses on the professional judgement of practitioners with the aim of enabling better-focused, holistic end-to-end assessment and intervention plans to improve outcomes for children. In the early days of the Covid 19

pandemic when public services were having to find new ways of working remotely, the robustness and appropriateness of interventions and tools were tested. The self-assessment tool is key for engaging the child and their parent/carer but not envisaged for children to complete independently, however the AssetPlus user guidance did not explicitly prohibit this, and it is not unreasonable to conclude that unsupported engagement with questions about suicide and self-harm could have a significant impact on a child. For the YJB, accordingly, my priority has been to ensure that all youth justice services are aware that AssetPlus should not be used for unsupported self-assessment, and to instruct any that were doing so to cease immediately.

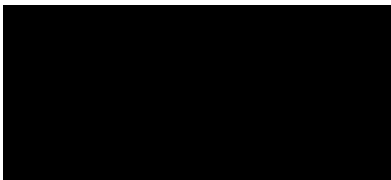
Acting upon your findings, we have written to all youth justice services asking them to consider their approaches to undertaking AssetPlus self-assessments and to remind them of the key principles in conducting self-assessments with children. This correspondence has been shared with you at Annex A.

I accept the need to review the AssetPlus guidance and we are already committed to reviewing this in the coming business year. In responding to your findings, this work will include within its scope, guidance that is specific to conducting self-assessments with children; particularly where they are more challenging to engage or where circumstances beyond the control of practitioners or the service dictates that these may have to be undertaken at a distance.

We are also in the process of revising our case management guidance to the sector, please see case management guidance extract on assessment process at Annex B, which provides youth justice service practitioners and managers with practical advice on how to work with children in the youth justice system. We are planning on publishing a revised set of guidance later this year and will include additional text on how best to conduct self-assessments.

My colleagues and I are absolutely committed to providing youth justice services with the guidance and support they need to deliver to the best of their ability. I believe the measures set out above strengthen the safety and wellbeing of children in the youth justice system and, I hope, offer you assurance that the lessons learned from Jake's death will be effective in preventing any such tragedy from happening in the future.

Yours sincerely



CEO  
Youth Justice Board for England and Wales

## **Annex A – correspondence sent to youth justice services**

Following an inquest into the circumstances surrounding the suicide of a child under youth justice supervision in the community, the YJB has received a Coroner's Prevention of Future Deaths (PFD) recommendation. The YJB always seeks to engage with the findings of investigations such as these to ensure that where there is direct or indirect learning for the youth justice system we are able to act upon this; to promote continuous learning, support the prevention of harm and disseminate this learning more widely for the benefit of outcomes for children.

The Coroner's matters of concern include the practice of how a self-assessment is undertaken with a child, given the sensitive issues touched upon within it, and the guidance in place to support this practice. The resulting PFD recommendation highlights that the YJB should review the guidance and procedures relating to the distribution and completion of the self-assessments [AssetPlus] given to children.

The YJB has accepted this recommendation and will be committing to reviewing AssetPlus guidance. In responding to the Coroner's findings, this will include within its scope guidance that is specific to conducting self-assessments with children; particularly where they are more challenging to engage or where circumstances beyond the control of practitioners or the service dictates that these may have to be undertaken at a distance.

In the interim, and in the absence of this fuller updated guidance, we are asking services to consider their approaches to undertaking AssetPlus self-assessments and outline the following reminders, both to disseminate the learning from this sad incident and to support the ongoing safety and wellbeing of children in the system.

Services are reminded that:

- Any engagement with a child should be fully in line with the child's needs.
- Best practice would suggest that the best approach to engagement should be discussed with the child and their parents/carers beforehand. Wherever this is not possible, as a minimum, liaison with other professionals who know the family should be undertaken.
- There is a presumption that self-assessments that support the more holistic assessment for a child, should be undertaken face to face.
- In the limited circumstances where professional judgement considers that a face to face self-assessment does not best support the child's needs, the reasons should be fully recorded and a managerial discussion undertaken.
- Out of hours support and/or information that is available to the child and/or parents and carers is in place, understood and easily accessible to them.

## **Annex B – Case management guidance extract on assessment process**

The assessment process is unlikely to be a neutral event for a child, particularly those with little or no experience of the justice system and for those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences and trauma. The telling (and re-telling) of their stories to individuals they do not know may be difficult and painful. The youth justice service may also be one of a range of agencies which is assessing their needs.

The assessment should not be conducted as an interview schedule. The way information is gathered is likely to be determined by the length of time you have known the child; any previous involvement with the justice system; their emotional well-being; problems with speech, language and communication and learning difficulties and disabilities.

Services should fully engage children and, where appropriate, their parents and carers in the assessment process; encourage them to participate and tell their stories in their own way; and to think about what interventions would assist and be meaningful to them. Sensitivity and skill are needed when the child and parent/carers are present together. There should always be the opportunity to speak to them separately. They need to understand what the purpose of the assessment is, how it will be undertaken and the information obtained used.

Particular attention should be given to:

- How questions are asked about sensitive issues such as family difficulties and adverse experiences
- Distress or discomfort
- Areas the child is reluctant to talk about
- What you can do to reduce anxiety

The information gathering section of AssetPlus includes a section in which children and their parents/carers can undertake a self-assessment (in English or Welsh). This provides the opportunity for them to state their views about various aspects of their life (which can be compared over time). Self-assessment can play an important part in understanding the child's experiences, identifying what is important to them and demonstrating their views are being taken into account.

The option of undertaking a self-assessment should be provided to all children and their parents/carers, and consideration given to whether they need any assistance to do this and how this could be provided.

How best to conduct a self-assessment should be fully considered in line with the child's needs; best practice would suggest that this should be discussed with them and their parents/carers beforehand, and if this is not possible as a minimum liaison with professionals who know the family should be undertaken.

There is a presumption that self-assessments should be undertaken face to face; in circumstances where professional judgement considers that a face to face self-assessment does not best support the child's needs the reasons should be fully

recorded and a managerial discussion undertaken. In all cases out of hours support and/or information should be available to the child and/or parents and carers, this should be understood and easily accessible to them.

Self-assessment covers the following topics:

- bail
- custody
- family, home and relationships
- smoking, drinking and drugs
- health and how I feel
- friends
- school, college and work
- offending (statutory only)
- my future
- working with the youth justice service
- working with Probation
- review
- custody review
- end of intervention

The self-assessment section of AssetPlus should be re-visited at regular intervals to ensure the views of children and parents/carers are thoroughly considered throughout their period of involvement with the youth justice service (not just at the start or end), to encourage their active involvement and contribution to the development of their assessments and intervention plans.