**BASW England warns that PAVA spray in youth custody risks trauma and mistrust**

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the professional association for social work in the UK with offices in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. With over 22,000 members we exist to promote the best possible social work services for all people who may need them, while also securing the well-being of social workers working in all health and social care settings.

BASW England’s [Criminal Justice group](https://basw.co.uk/support/groups-and-networks/thematic-groups-england/criminal-justice-group) today expresses serious concern at the Ministry of Justice’s (MOJ) decision, announced 24 April 2025, to [introduce PAVA incapacitant spray across all youth custody settings in England](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-04-24/hcws599). We believe this policy change will undermine safety, trust and the therapeutic environments essential to supporting children/young people in custody.

“PAVA spray should be reserved for the most extreme adult custodial incidents -not used routinely against vulnerable children and young people.” **Caroline Bald (Co-Chair of the Criminal Justice group).**

**"**Introducing PAVA not only fuels trauma and erodes trust, it contravenes the fundamental principle that a child's welfare is paramount whilst raising concerns around torture, inhuman and degrading treatment. This marks yet another systemic failure to safeguard society’s most vulnerable children, turning rehabilitation into sanctioned harm and abuse - further diminishing their right to dignity and care.” **Oshéa Johnson (Member of the Criminal Justice group).**

“Deploying chemical incapacitant risks exacerbating trauma, provoking fear and damaging the crucial relationships between staff and young people that underpin effective rehabilitation.” **Wayne Reid** **(BASW England Professional Officer).**

**Key concerns include:**

* **Trauma and health risks**: Chemical sprays can cause respiratory distress, eye injuries, and panic attacks—particularly among young people with prior histories of abuse, mental health struggles or neurodivergent conditions.
* **Erosion of trust**: Youth justice social workers strive to build rapport and trust. The presence of PAVA as even as a specialist response tool sends a signal of control and coercion, not care and support. It sets a precedence opening a gateway to further roll out.
* **Deterrent to engagement**: Fear of chemical force may discourage young people from participating in education, therapy and restorative programmes critical to reducing reoffending.
* **Alternatives exist**: De-escalation training, relational approaches, improved education access and enhanced staffing levels have proven more effective and less harmful in managing challenging behaviour in youth settings.

BASW calls on the MOJ and His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to:

1. **Halt the roll-out** of PAVA spray in youth establishments pending an independent review of evidence on its impacts in child settings.
2. **Invest in non-coercive strategies**, including comprehensive de-escalation training for all staff and increased access to qualified youth justice social workers and mental health professionals.
3. **Engage with experts and young people** to co-produce a rights-respecting framework for behaviour management that places welfare and rehabilitation at its centre.

The Criminal Justice group states: “We understand the pressures on secure settings, but resorting to chemical sprays against children is not the answer. A genuinely rehabilitative youth estate requires relationships built on respect, safety and understanding - not fear.”

We hope this feedback is helpful and received in the constructive spirit with which it is intended.

Co-ordinator of members’ responses & compilation

Wayne Reid

BASW England Professional Officer

British Association of Social Workers

[wayne.reid@basw.co.uk](mailto:wayne.reid@basw.co.uk)