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Re-Designing Secure Children's Homes Through a Child-First Lens

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Abstract: This article explores existing learning gaps concerning optimal ways to support children within and beyond secure care in England and Wales, with a specific focus on Secure Children's Homes (SCHs). Insights from key stakeholders working in SCHs are often omitted from research despite being fundamental to understanding both challenges and best-practice initiatives. The Children's Residential Care Research Network, which is a collaboration between the authors, aims to develop novel research with stakeholders working across the secure children's estate and expand the extant literature to inform the design and build of future Secure Children's Homes (SCH) through a Child-First lens. The research presented here involves a mixed-methods approach gathering rich qualitative data from participants across the sector. Fifty-three participants engaged in participatory methodologies, focus groups, and interviews, which led to a large data set. Thematic analysis identified three key themes to inform the design and build of new SCHs. SCHs should (i) be close to home to enable family involvement and continuity of care, (ii) feel like a home, and (iii) be flexible and adaptive to changing needs. These findings are feeding into the design of two new homes in England as well as the refurbishment of existing provision and can also influence future expansion of the secure estate. The research also contributes to knowledge about how the Child-First tenets can be engaged to improve outcomes for children deprived of their liberty, both in and outside the youth justice system.

Keywords: Child-First; deprivation of liberty; design and build; Secure Children's Homes; thematic analysis

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1. Introduction

Secure Children's Homes (SCHs) are locked institutions for children (aged 10 to 17) who have been deprived of their liberty. They are unique within the secure estate in England and Wales, as they can accommodate (i) children on remand or sentenced for an offence (justice grounds) and/or (ii) children deprived of their liberty on welfare grounds under Section 25 (1)(a) and (b) of the Children Act 1989. Section 25 is applicable where the child "has a history of absconding and is likely to abscond from any other description of accommodation" and if they are "likely to suffer significant harm if they abscond" or, if they remain, "in any other description of accommodation he is likely to injure himself or other persons" [1]. SCHs were described thirty years ago as "both incarceration and an alternative to incarceration, a form of control imposed in order that care can be provided" [2]. SCHs are intended to have more of a childcare ethos than Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) and Secure Training Centres (STCs), which are part of the justice custodial estate. There are currently 14 SCHs in England and Wales, 13 of which are operational, providing

249 approved care places for vulnerable children aged 10 to 17 [3]. Of these, two accommodate children solely on criminal justice grounds, six accommodate children on welfare grounds, and the remaining five accommodate children on both types of placement. On 31 March 2024, there were 156 children accommodated in SCHs in England and Wales [4]. Of these, 46% (72) were placed on welfare grounds, 38% (59) were placed by the Youth Custody Service (YCS) upon conviction for criminal offending, and 16% (25) were placed by the local authority in a criminal justice context, which refers to children held on remand awaiting a criminal trial [5] and children who have been denied police bail [6].

When SCHs are at their best, they demonstrate that "secure accommodation based on a child care ethos can provide a safe environment that has the potential to minimise the damage caused by custody while preparing children for a positive future on release" [7]. In the short term, SCHs keep young people safe, engage them, provide them with stability, and identify causes of high-risk behaviour. SCHs also offer the opportunity to provide intensive educational provision to young people that accelerates their literacy and numeracy ability, resulting in a marked increase in their National Curriculum (NC) levels in both English and Maths [8]. A study conducted by CASCADE (the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre at Cardiff University), however, found that SCHs struggled to "meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable children in our society" [9]. This study found that SCHs are "... failing older boys with challenging behaviours" [9]. Similarly, international research consistently shows that care-experienced children, including children leaving secure care, as a group are likely to be among the most socially excluded young people in society [10]. The National Crime Agency reported from police forces areas across England and Wales in 2017 that children who have been in care are particularly at risk of being actively targeted by county-lines drugs networks and are vulnerable to sexual exploitation [11].

This article addresses existing fundamental learning gaps concerning optimal ways to support children within and beyond secure care. Insights from key stakeholders working in SCHs are often omitted from research despite being fundamental to understanding both challenges and best-practice initiatives. We herein report on novel research with stakeholders working across the secure children's estate and develop the extant literature to inform the design and build of future SCHs through a Child-First lens. The research is particularly timely considering the (then) government's pledge of GBP 259 million at the 2021 Spending Review to create new SCHs and refurbish existing provision [12]. In the 2024 budget, the (then) Chancellor Jeremy Hunt pledged an additional GBP 165 million for building and maintaining existing open and secure homes, thereby increasing capacity within the secure estate [13]. The current government are yet to outline their intention regarding expenditure in this context, though. This investment is desperately needed, as there was a 462% rise in the number of children deprived of their liberty in unregulated—and often wholly unsuitable—placements in the three years up to 2020/21, and there were 1389 applications made between July 2022 and June 2023 because of a shortage of secure placements [14]. Lord Stephens, concerning In the Matter of T (A Child) (Appellant) [15], lamented the following:

> *"the enduring well-known scandal of the disgraceful and utterly shaming lack of proper provision for children who require approved secure accommodation. These unfortunate children, who have been traumatised in so many ways, are frequently a major risk to themselves and to others. Those risks are of the gravest kind, and include risks to life, risks of grievous injuries, or risks of very serious damage to property. This scandalous lack of provision leads to applications to the court under its inherent jurisdiction to authorise the deprivation of a child's liberty in a children's home which has not been registered, there being no other available or suitable accommodation".*

The (then) government had also committed, since 2016, to closing all YOIs and STCs in the long-term and replacing them with Secure Schools, which will be modelled on SCHs. The 2022 Independent Review of Children's Social Care recommended that YOIs

and STCs "should be phased out within the next ten years to be replaced by SCHs or secure schools" [16].

The current authors focus specifically on conceptual design rather than location but note that SCHs close to a child's home aid transition and support maintaining family connections [17]. This is important, as there is variability in terms of the location of SCHs. For example, there is currently no SCH in London, with the result that children from London—on welfare and justice placements—must travel far from their local authority for placements in SCHs. Children deprived of their liberty on welfare grounds have been placed up to 399 km away from home, with the median distance being 132.3 km [18], which can equate to the distance from London to Cardiff or Newcastle to Manchester [19]. In 2018, 32 (37%) children in secure care in Scotland had been placed by English and Welsh local authorities, and in 2019, there were 27 such placements (39%). The practice of placing children in cross-border placements in Scotland is continuing despite calls for an end to this practice by the former Scottish Children's Commissioner on the grounds that placements of English children in Scottish Homes results in limited local availability for Scottish children [20]. Andow identified the importance of feelings of safety and homeliness within secure care and that these ideals are often experienced as inversely related [21]. Souverein et al. [22] found that in the context of youth justice settings, a pre-occupation with security often outweighs an emphasis on care, but safe, therapeutic spaces tailored to the needs of individual children and with a focus on relational security are best able to encourage young people's positive development. Dwyer similarly identified that facilities should be as "homey" as possible and without institutional characteristics [23]. Following an international study of the physical environments of custodial facilities for children, Dwyer advocated that facilities should be (i) small-scale; (ii) close to home to enable family involvement and continuity of care; (iii) comfortable, safe-feeling, and therapeutic; (iv) flexible and adaptive to changing needs; and (v) open to young people's involvement in the initial design and ongoing adaptation. Optimistically, Dwyer suggested that facilities for residential placements should be designed to be easily decommissioned as successful diversion programmes negate their need.

Our study builds upon these findings and considers whether there is international consensus around the most salient features of secure care. We also engage with the new guiding youth justice principle of "Child-First" and position it as a lens through which we critically explore the design of SCHs. The Child-First ethos emphasises the importance of addressing children as children, considering the whole child, and identifying structural barriers they face to focus on better outcomes for children [24]. We then outline our research methodology, which principally engages professionals from across the SCH sector in day-long events using small group-based creative methods to address core questions related to the design and build of SCHs. Data were generated through methods including the Diamond9, Solution Sketchpads, and Wall Poster questions—all of which are detailed below—and discussions were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

Reflexive qualitative thematic analysis revealed three core themes to inform the design of SCHs that align very closely with Dwyer's, as outlined above: (1) close to home to enable family involvement and continuity of care, (2) feels like a home, and (3) flexible and adaptable to changing needs. Dwyer's recommendation that the home be open to young people's initiatives is captured within our second finding. The idea that homes should be small-scale was not stated explicitly but perhaps assumed, as SCHs in England and Wales are small institutions. This aligns with research conducted by the Anna Freud Foundation's evaluation of the implementation and impact of the Framework for Integrated Care (SECURE STAIRS), a trauma-informed approach designed to improve care quality and outcomes for young people in the secure estate. The evaluation recognised that such implementation is less problematic in SCHs because of their smaller size when compared with STCs and YOIs [25]. We expand on how our findings align with Dwyer's recommendations and the practical implications thereof below.

2. Child-First

The idea of promoting children's autonomy resonates with the Child-First approach. Child-First is a child-focused and developmentally informed approach that aims to promote children's individual strengths and capacities to develop their pro-social identity and help them to make positive contributions to society [26]. The Youth Justice Board's Strategic Plan 2021–24 adopts the principle of Child-First as a central guiding principle and envisages the English and Welsh youth justice system as one that treats children as children and protects them from all harms that might hinder their growth and ability to realise their potential [27]. The Youth Justice Board's Business Plan 2022–23 envisages a youth justice system in England and Wales that supports children to be as successful as they possibly can and makes sure that children are not unnecessarily criminalised [28]. A Child-First youth justice system is one that involves a holistic, individualistic, tailored approach delivered through universal services based on a child's welfare needs and focuses on their strengths and future aspirations [29]. Professor Neal Hazel, Board Member of the Youth Justice Board, stated that "Child-First isn't a phrase, mantra, or philosophy; it's the published guiding principle for the youth justice sector. Essentially, it summarises our contemporary evidence-based understanding in youth justice" [30]. Case and Browning, in their research that examined the implementation of Child-First, characterised Child-First as a guiding principle [31]; while Case and Hazel described Child-First as a principled and progressive philosophy that "moves above and beyond conventional bifurcated constructions of children's offending beset by conceptual, systemic and practical reductionism" [32]. In this article, we utilise the Child-First principle as a theory of change that uses an ecological approach to champion a "'positive promotion' approach. . .. grounded in principles of universalism, diversion and normalisation, pursued through (non-criminal justice) practice that is inclusionary, participatory and legitimate" [33]. We engage Child-First as a structure providing conceptual framing that supports our methodological choices and a lens that affords different ways of interpreting data.

Key elements of an effective Child-First model include a pivot away from children being "excessively criminalised" and subject to "cruel and unusual punishment" in the youth justice system [33,34]. The Youth Justice Board's Child-First approach builds upon the Case and Haines "Children First, Offenders Second" (CFOS) model [35,36], which emphasises that all youth justice services should be trauma-informed, rights-based, and operate in a way that is constructive and future-focussed [37]. Case and Haines identified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was ratified by the UK in 1991, and the associated child-friendly justice instruments as "establishing parameters" that inform the CFOS model. The UN Convention has not been incorporated by the UK government and is not binding in English domestic law. Nevertheless, this Convention promotes the idea of children as independent bearers of rights invested with agency, integrity, and decision-making capacities [38]. Article 3 of the UNCRC requires that the best interest of children is at the heart of the interpretation of children's rights and decision-making processes, "whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies" [39]. Article 40(1) of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child requires that criminal justice interventions should provide equal opportunities for successful rehabilitation and reintegration to all children to enable them to assume a constructive role within society. The UN Convention promotes the view that all children enjoy the right to have their voice heard and considered in all decision making, particularly in judicial and administrative proceedings (Article 12) [39]. The Article 12 right of the child to be heard has been characterised as one of the most innovative provisions of the UNCRC, as it confirms that children should be regarded as capable of participating in proceedings affecting them, in accordance with their evolving capacities assessed on the basis of age and individual maturity [40]. General Comment 12 on the right to be heard notes that "a child cannot be heard effectively where the environment is intimidating, hostile, insensitive or inappropriate for her or his age" [41].

There are four tenets of Child-Friendly Justice, which state that all youth justice services should see children as children; develop pro-social identity for positive child outcomes; encourage a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers; and promote a childhood removed from the justice system using pre-emptive prevention, diversion, and minimal intervention. In this respect, the Child-First approach is designed to "minimise criminogenic stigma from contact with the [criminal justice] system" [26] by empowering children to fulfil their potential, make positive contributions to society, and encouraging active participation, engagement, and wider social inclusion. Child-First operates to make adults responsible for the explicit promotion of pro-social, positive outcomes for children, minimising the child's exposure to risk, including the prevention of any long-term damage to children [24,37]. The Child-First approach requires that all work with children should be developmentally appropriate and acknowledge their inherent "child" status, focusing prospectively (into the future) on facilitating positive behaviours [42]. In this article, we engage with Child-First as a critical theoretical tool to argue for its expansion beyond the youth justice system to children detained in SCHs whether on welfare or criminal justice grounds. We utilised Child-First as a theoretical framework to build and support the methodology and analytical approach to make a unique application of Child-First to children in SCHs to highlight the link between the design and build of a SCH and the child's individualised right to an equal chance in life, including the provision of support during childhood, to maximize their developmental capacity to the threshold of adulthood.

3. Background and Aims

McGimpsey et al.'s report on the state of evidence about residential childcare found only limited evidence on "what elements of residential care are beneficial for who, in what circumstances" and how to link "quality care and outcomes" [43]. McGimpsey highlighted the following as limitations: a lack of a widely shared, positive definition of what provision of residential care for children and young people entails; that studies in the field "...often lack descriptions of the service populations and well-defined service components"; and that the findings are often not generalisable, as they may focus upon youth psychiatric setting, non-secure residential settings, or criminal justice custodial settings [44]. Furthermore, the production of evidence is also undermined by debate over whether provision is best understood in terms of interventions or practices or in programme-level terms, such as trauma-informed care, rather than design and build. For example, McKeown et al.'s study of SCHs recommended the importance of trauma-informed approaches to inform their care given the prevalence of traumatic experiences in young people residing in secure care settings [45]. Such approaches may include those informed by the SECURE STAIRS framework. The SECURE STAIRS framework is a whole-system approach to integrated care that is based upon trauma-informed care underpinned by psychological theory, and it can help inform intervention and treatment pathways [46]. Grundle's study recommends that the most effective care involves wrap-around care incorporating existing child and family strengths so that a combination of natural support and community support could provide a comprehensive treatment [47]. Some international research has engaged with issues relating to design and build. Van der Helm at al.'s study of young people detained in secure care on criminal justice grounds found that an open-group climate facilitates one the most important educational and rehabilitative aims of secure residential care, namely successful reintegration into society through restoring the bond with society [48]. Polvere's studies of young people detained in secure care found that where the practicing ethos was designed for control, this may have facilitated appropriate behaviour within institutions but failed to promote agency and meaningful participation when young people left care [49]. Polvere stressed the importance of an environment within residential youth care that is not repressive and creates possibilities for self-determination and choice so that youth can prepare for adulthood. Bramsen et al.'s qualitative studies outlined that providing a climate for developing autonomy within secure childcare settings is a complex challenge [50]. Williams et al.'s mixed-methodology study of the experiences of all 44 young people from

Wales referred to a SCH for welfare reasons over a two-year period found that despite calls for SCH placements to be more therapeutic, health-promoting environments that use trauma-informed approaches, evidence suggests that many SCHs focus on keeping young people safe and contained rather than providing sufficient therapy [51]. A common perception held by young people in their study was that a secure accommodation order and the time in a SCH were punishments, a view influenced by the prison-like environments, restraints, locks, and lack of privacy found in some secure units. These views led Williams to ask for consideration of how to provide safe and secure homes with less authoritarian atmospheres and more home-like environments, reflecting a Child-First approach.

Our research builds upon this literature by engaging with children, professionals, and experts to develop a critical understanding regarding how a SCH can be designed and operationalised in a way that ensures a positive experience for children during their stay and optimal outcomes when they return to their families and/or communities. Our study aims to answer the following question: What needs to be considered in the design, development, and on-going management of a secure children's home to achieve the best outcomes for the children accommodated? To answer this question, we consider the following issues: How do the different parts of the building (administration, education, leisure, kitchen, movement within, etc.) work together? How can the environment be designed to be both homely and safe and support appropriate methods of risk management? What characteristics does the building design require to prepare children for a "non-secure setting"?

4. Materials and Methods

Our research involved a mixed-methods approach to gather rich qualitative data from participants across the sector with various experience of SCHs. Fifty-three individuals participated in this research over two days, with an event held in London and a second event in Wolverhampton. In addition, one in-depth semi-structured interview was undertaken with a SCH manager who was unable to attend either event but wanted to participate. This participant group has a unique inside, close-up perspective, and the range of roles within the participant group gives credibility and strength to our data collection. Bringing this group together is in itself unique and had its own particular challenges. The stakeholder events provided a unique opportunity to generate data with participants from a range of roles who have first-hand experiences of secure care—a world that is usually difficult to access—as well as practitioner, policy, and academic perspectives. The diversity of experiences within the participant group strengthened the data generated. Further, the bringing together of this group is unique, and the variety of creative and interactive methodologies used represents an innovative methodological approach. Given the small number of SCHs and the challenges associated with staff recruitment and retention in addition to the dearth of data within the literature on experiences within SCHs, the data presented represent a significant and novel contribution to the field.

4.1. Ethical Approval

The ethical principles and procedures of the British Society of Criminology were followed, and ethical approval was granted through the respective institutional Ethics Committees of each of the researchers. (Ethics applications were duplicated across each University to ensure institutional compliance for each of the researchers.) Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to participants. Participant responses were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised for analysis. The responses presented below are not identified by method or location to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

4.2. Sample

Participants were invited to the workshops based on their experience of working within the remit of SCHs, whether internally or externally. Participants had a range of professional backgrounds, including direct experience of working in SCHs, social care,

education, youth justice, health, and third sector. Academics and policymakers were also present. Each group of participants was carefully considered by the research team, and it was important to gather a range of stakeholders who could provide insight into the current best practice and issues facing SCHs. When a child enters a SCH, a range of professionals are involved in their admittance, care, and step down. Each of their perspectives is valuable to obtain views on the child's journey, and collectively, their unique insights provide a holistic overview of SCHs. The events were advertised on Eventbrite and through SCH organisations and key contacts to ensure a diverse group of participants. In the workshops, participants were randomly allocated across focus groups with a moderator from the research team allocated to each group. The random allocation was chosen to bring together diverse perspectives without any influence from the researchers. In addition, one in-depth interview was carried out with a very experienced manager of a SCH.

4.3. Methods

Focus groups were chosen because they are useful "where there is little known about the topic under investigation" [52]. An overall moderator was appointed to ask the same questions, such as "What is it like to live in a SCH today?" and "How can we make a SCH world-leading?" of the entire group and to direct each activity, resulting in a structured approach. Focus groups were facilitated by members of the research team, and findings/observations between groups were shared with the other groups at the end of discussions following each session so as not to influence other groups during initial conversations. Questions were designed to draw on the opinions of those participating and could, aligned with Guest et al.'s study, be classified as "simple to moderately complex": What works well in SCHs? What are the challenges in SCHs? What key factors should be considered in the build and design of SCHs? Though varying in backgrounds, the population of those involved could be classified as relatively homogenous given their specialist knowledge of a niche area of the secure estate. Further research involving more discipline-specific questions might have required greater homogeneity, but for these purposes the cohort of participants was optimal. Given the dearth of rich qualitative data on the issues our questions were designed to address, we sought to gather "salient themes" in a manner akin to Guest et al. rather than focusing on granular level data, which aligned with the categorisation style of the analysts in Guest et al.'s study [53]. Discussion within the focus groups was further supported using the Diamond9 and Solution Sketchpad methods, both outlined below. All discussions were recorded for each group and transcribed.

The interview with the expert who could not make the event was semi-structured, guided by a flexible schedule of questions. These questions focused on the design and build of SCHs and learning from experience. The interview lasted 52 min and was recorded and auto-transcribed. The research team plans to undertake a series of expert interviews in the future, following a similar format. An interview was appropriate for this data generation because it allowed for deep discovery, flexibility, and adaptability to what the interviewee had to say while ensuring that the interviewer could maintain their focus of enquiry.

General consensus across the literature is that six to eight participants is optimal for focus group discussion [52]. Saturation, i.e., where repeating focus groups will provide no new themes, has been observed as "the gold standard" for qualitative data gathering [54]. Empirical research data have demonstrated through testing the saturation point in both deductive and inductive research approaches that five is an optimal number of focus groups. A more recent empirical study by Guest et al. highlighted that, utilising inductive thematic analysis, almost two-thirds of the content codes were generated by the first focus group and 84% by the third focus group, while 90% saturation was met by the sixth focus group [53]. The findings suggest the following:

> *"a sample size of two to three focus groups will likely capture at least 80% of themes on a topic—including those most broadly shared—in a study with a relatively homogeneous population using a semi structured guide. As few as three to six focus groups are likely to identify 90% of the themes".* [53]

The researchers noted that the "generalisability" of those findings depended on five factors that could "affect the rate at which saturation is approached: (1) degree of instrument structure; (2) sample homogeneity; (3) complexity of the study topic; (4) study purpose; and (5) analyst categorization style" [53].

4.3.1. Diamond9

The Diamond9 visual research model originates from primary education research. It has been described as a "thinking skills tool" [54] designed to "encourage discussion about the relative importance of certain factors" [55]. The important aspect of the Diamond9, however, is not necessarily the final position of what is being explored, as there is no right or wrong answer. The importance is the "process of discussion, negotiation, accommodation to other perspectives, and consensus-seeking that takes place in agreeing the ranking" [56]. This methodology captures comparisons and distinctions made across the different categories under discussion and enables researchers to observe their overarching relationship to each other [57]. The Diamond9 tool allowed individuals with different roles and backgrounds to come together and prioritise challenges. This aligned with our purpose of discovering the common and most salient issues in secure care.

In each group, participants created nine cards and were asked to place them on the Diamond9 board, with the most important issue to address in SCHs at the top and the least important at the bottom. Cards placed on the same row were given the same weight of importance, as indicated by the colour on Figure 1, and the final diamond presented the researcher with the opportunity to explore the relationship between different elements. Each line on the board was given a numerical number for analysis, with five for the top and one for the bottom. The Diamond9 was used to explore what is not working well currently in SCHs. There was no specific focus at this point on the design and build aspect of the research, as we explored whether participants would address this issue organically without prompting or influence. To analyse the Diamond9 data, each section of the board was allocated a value, as shown on Figure 1 [58].

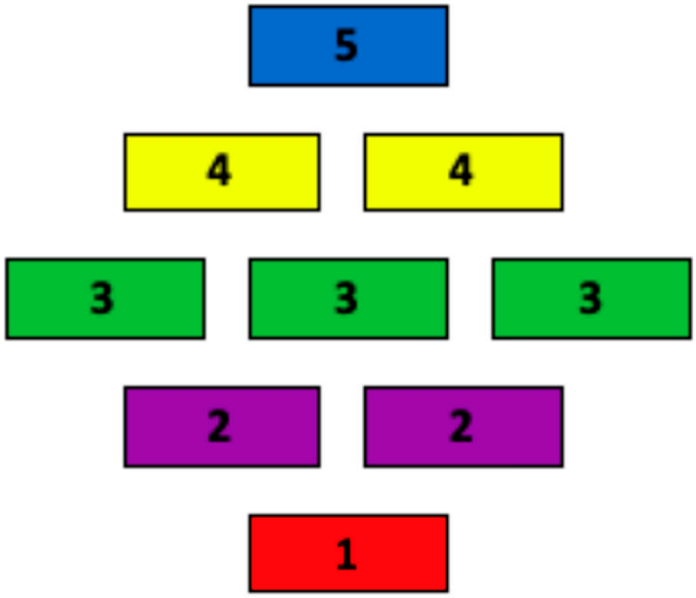

Figure 1. Assigned Value to Diamond9 Card Placement. The colour relates to the row, and each card on that row carrying the same weight of importance, and the number indicates the value given to the card for analysis.

The higher the card was placed on the board, the higher the value it was assigned. The lower it was placed on the board, the lower the value it was assigned. When presented below in graphs, the numbers allocated relate to this diagram and the value placement. The cards were input into an Excel Spreadsheet, and numerical values were assigned to observe the placement on the board.

4.3.2. Solution Sketchpad

Solution Sketchpads were also utilised to facilitate discussions. Solution Sketchpads were developed for an "unsolved problems unsession" [59] run at the Canada GeoConvention in 2013. The template allows focus group discussions to be collated by requiring participants to define the problem, add a visual representation of the problem, identify who is affected by the problem, and suggest simple first steps to a solution. Participants are then asked to summarise findings in a "Tweet", which is then used to present discussions at each table in a plenary session.

4.4. Analysis

The qualitative data from all methods were subject to (reflexive) thematic analysis:

> *"Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data".* [60]

Codes were inductive and developed latently with themes and concepts informed by the data's content. Reflexivity was favoured given the emphasis on addressing experiences and opinions of the stakeholders. Using Braun and Clarke's stages of thematic analysis, the team met in person to go through the transcripts and generate initial codes. Once these codes were determined, we sought to ensure consistency across coders through the development of a common coding framework using NVivo 14. This was to ensure that the same codes were used to enhance the comparability of the data amongst the research team, which aligned with the use of codebooks [61]. We continued our coding remotely and met again in person to finalise the codes and develop the themes.

The following core themes emerged. SCHs should have the following characteristics:

- be close to home to enable family involvement and continuity of care;
- feel like a home;
- be flexible and adaptive to changing needs.

These findings clearly align with the Child-First principles of prioritising the best interests of children; recognising their needs, capacities, rights, and potential; and building on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society [62].

5. Findings

This section presents the findings and discussions from all focus groups and the one expert interview. It begins with displaying the quantitative findings from the Diamond9 and the main themes identified from Solution Sketchpads. The qualitative data are then used to put the quantitative data into context and provide more depth to the views and experiences of the participants.

5.1. Diamond9 and Solution Sketchpad

The final cards and placement are shown on Figures 2 and 3: one for each event, with the group number next to the card. The cards highlighted in yellow relate to the design and build of SCHs. We grouped these under the three core themes identified above.

Points related to build and design, highlighted in yellow on the above image, were identified seven times across four groups, meaning some groups created more than one card relating to build and design.

Points related to build and design, highlighted in yellow on the above image, were identified six times across all five groups meaning, one group created two cards relating to build and design.

The cards created and rankings that related to design and build were then collated and displayed in Figure 4:

Figure 4 collates the cards relating to design and build across both groups and shows their placement on the board (5 being the top of the board and 1 being the bottom of the board). Nine out of the eleven groups created a card relating to the design and build of a SCH, highlighting the importance of the building in several ways. No group placed a card relating to design and build into the most important part of the board, but it did appear in the row below twice: one for distance from home/insufficient family contact and another for facilities and space. Where it was created, it was more likely to be placed on the bottom row rather than anywhere else on the board. Three groups created and placed more than one card that related to design and build. There is a connected importance in terms of the need for multiple cards to be created, though some aspects, such as distance and links to family members and feeling like a home, were generally seen to be more important than others, such as community provisions/networks. The Diamond9 helped to organise the opinions and perceptions of the participants and to generate discussion. The placement of the cards on its own does not provide a holistic overview of the discussions, and the qualitative data generated help us to understand the reasoning behind the placements. The five groups of cards presented above are further present in the themes generated from the qualitative data analysis discussed below.

Figure 2. Final cards created and placement per group for London stakeholders. The yellow highlighting indicates cards which relate to the design and build of a SCH.

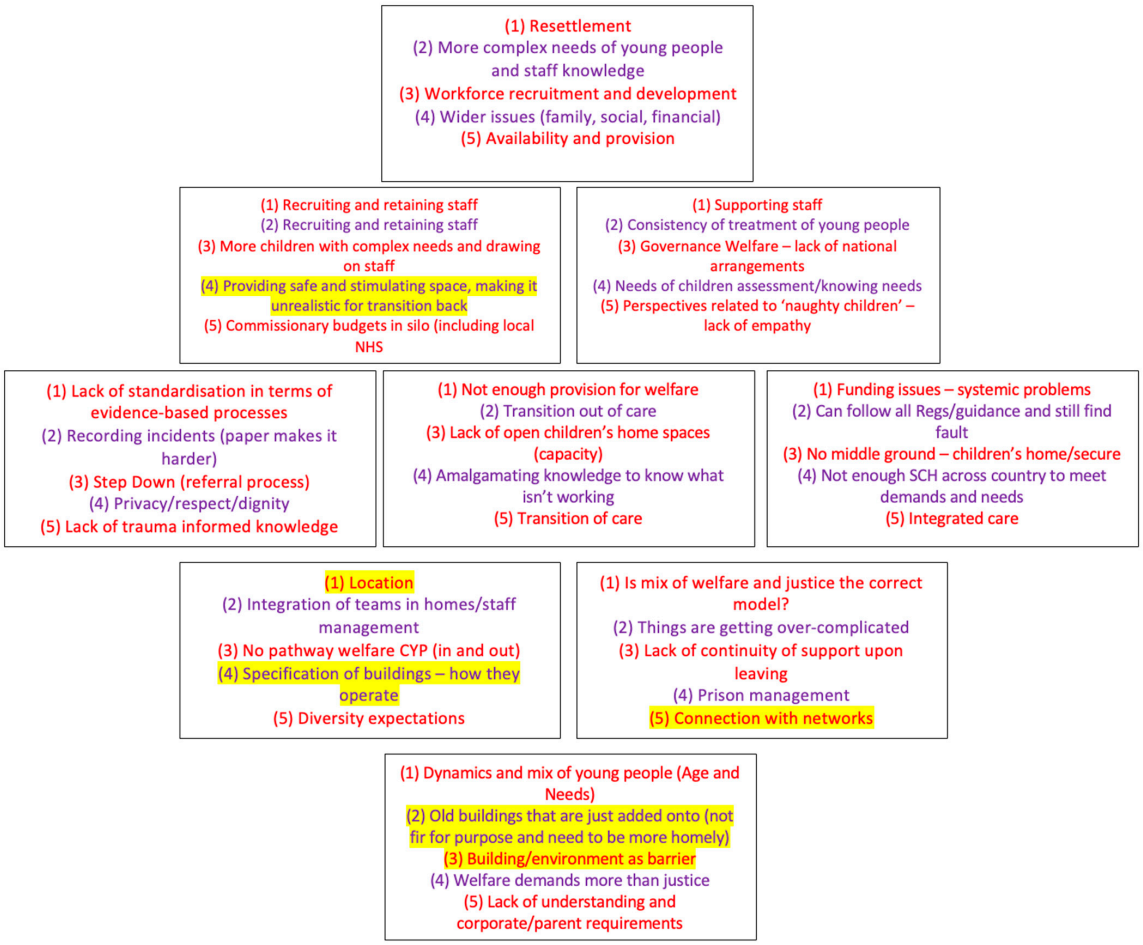

Figure 3. Final cards created and placement per group for Wolverhampton stakeholders. The yellow highlighting indicates cards which relate to the design and build of a SCH.

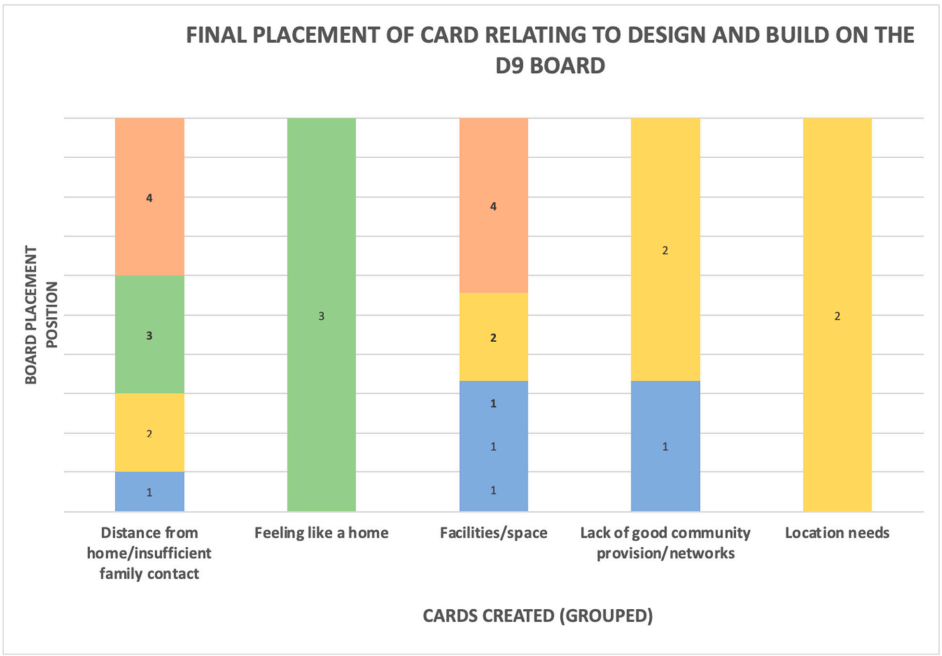

Figure 4. Graph showing the placement of cards relating to build and design of a SCH for all groups. The numbers indicate where on the board the card was placed, in line with the analysis shown in Figure 1.

Following the Diamond9, participants were asked to engage with the Solution Sketchpad and specifically focus on the design and build issues of SCHs. Table 1 below outlines the issues and potential solutions to help solve them. Qualitative data from these discussions are used to illustrate the points in the table further. They also link back to the three key themes generated by the qualitative data outlined below, which are included in this table. Participants created the following:

Table 1. Solution sketchpad issues raised and solutions suggested.

Issue on Solutions Sketchpad	Solutions/Recommendations	Key Theme(s)
Resettlement: lack of smooth transition back into family home and community.	Family spaces in SCH for family activities, such as kitchens. More self-sufficiency options built into the space, so young people can develop vital life skills. Opportunities to prove trust and independence. Develop a community space for a community team, including gardens and a space for pets. Create more normal experience, such as paths to "walk to school" and creating a campus feel. Transitional/step down beds attached to SCH.	Feel like a home Be flexible and adaptive to changing needs. Be close to home to enable family involvement and continuity of care.
Having a space that feels homely but can be adapted. This includes the front looking welcoming and spaces that are not too stimulating but child-friendly. Buildings are starting to not feel fit for purpose and lack flexibility for provisions to be put in place. Need to be easy to manage.	More resources and funding are needed for a full restructure of some spaces. Needs to feel less like a custodial space. More guidance from experts (including Ofsted) on space design and decorating, taking into account the age range and gender of those in SCH. Help to understand how paint, fabric, and poster choices can impact young people and operational practice. Young people and prior residents to co-create the space/be involved. More outside, recreational, and therapeutic spaces.	Feel like a home.
Reduction of void bed spaces and external spaces.	Consistency of design across UK and a flexible plan for efficiency and optimisation of space.	Be flexible and adaptive to changing needs.
Lack of space for certain provisions, such as consultation rooms, storage for children's belongings, sensory rooms, staff parking, and visitor spaces. Lack of privacy and spaces when needing to keep young people apart. Lack of ventilation, causing spread of illnesses in SCH.	Spaces to be truly trauma-informed and to understand the needs of different cultures. Spaces provided for mental health services.	Be flexible and adaptive to changing needs.
Issues of community accepting SCHs into their area.	Conversations with stakeholders. Changes to public and political discourse.	

The thematic analysis of those discussions considering the above Diamond9 and Solution Sketchpad data are discussed in the next section.

5.2. Qualitative Results

Three key themes emerged from the focus groups and Diamond9 and Sketchpad Solution exercises, which closely echo Dwyer's findings [23]. On this basis, and with the added

confidence that our findings mirror existing international research and prove consistent with the Child-First principles, we advocate that SCHs should have the following characteristics:

- be close to home to enable family involvement and continuity of care;
- feel like a home;
- be flexible and adaptive to changing needs.

We elaborate further on these themes below and contextualise them within recent literature and using a Child-First lens. The final section of this article before we conclude explores learning from existing practices and recommendations based on the findings and data collected.

5.2.1. Close to Home to Enable Family Involvement and Continuity of Care

As highlighted above, young people can be placed hundreds of miles away from home due to a lack of beds locally. This can cause issues with family visits and disrupt local community ties. This is counterintuitive to the central tenets of Child-First, which encourages meaningful collaboration with children and their carers. Similarly, maintaining such bonds is essential in aiding with the skills needed for transition. Cards relating to this theme were placed across the board in terms of importance, and it was also highlighted as a problem that needed a solution during the Sketchpad exercise.

5.2.2. Placement Far from Family/Home Community

A placement being far from home was one of the most created cards during the Diamond9 exercise and also appeared on a Solution Sketchpad. During discussions around the Diamond9 placement, one participant highlighted the difficulties in working with the families of children who are coming from all over the country and another that continuity of care for the young person can be better when they are close to home. Carers in the context of Child-First should be construed more broadly than carers within the Secure Home but also include family members and/or others who would support the child upon transition. There was an identified need in some groups for there to be contact with the outside world and a permeable space for young people to have contact with their families and accommodation on site for staff and families to stay in. Participants recognised the challenges associated with family visits where children are placed far from home and the impact on family ties and the wider community, with one stating, "there is not a smooth transition from secure to community". Participants highlighted how this can have a lasting impact on the transition back into the community and their ability to participate in it. To bring the community aspect into the SCH, the following were suggested:

> *"You could have a community space, get a community team. So, if you were truly working directly with your community team and they were based within the same setting, maybe".*

> *"You could also have activities that you could transfer, if you had gardens and things like that, where you could grow your own stuff and learn. . . you know you could take those activities into the community".*

> *"Recreating a village in a community, essentially, with a secure parameter around it"*

The above suggestions can help connect a young person in a SCH with their community so that when they leave the SCH, there is familiarity with where they are transitioning to. In the context of Child-First, this is essential to assist children in developing a pro-social identity and equip them with the skills they need. If this does not happen, it could affect the ability of a young person to deal with their reality outside of the SCH:

> *"This is what you need to make it stick. The building needs to somewhat be a replica of community life might be like. Because it feels a little bit like it's a bit like a bubble, and everything's really great, and you could design the most fantastic space, and then we talk about resettlement, how does that kind of mirror? So we do we want to make it fantastic and outstanding, because does that really stick, or are we actually creating more problems than we solve?"*

This was also highlighted when participants stated they wanted more sensory rooms, rooms to chill out, music spaces, and other activity spaces for the young people to express their emotions and learn to calm down. This will help them while in the SCH, but if that is not replicable for them in their own community, it may be setting them up to fail: "What is the point of us doing this? Are we doing something that is only going to be useful in that particular setting?" It was suggested that more consideration is given to the community the young person comes from and how best to replicate this in alignment with Child-First to ensure young people have the skills necessary to succeed on leaving secure care.

Consideration also had to be given to community aspects during care, such as the school the young person will be returning to and the services they can access after leaving the SCH. This means the family and school have to be on a similar journey as the young person to assist in such provision. As one participant explained, work needs to be done in terms of maintaining family connections and continuity of care:

> *"...not only with the young person whilst they are living in the secure provision, but actually the support, the wraparounds, that needs to be offered to family, friendship network, school provision, other services that young person will access at the point that they exit the secure provision. Because what we talked about a lot was the journey that we need to support young people on whilst they're in the secure provision. But actually if we are not mirroring that in some way with parent, granny, whoever it is, that young person will be living with, the teachers that will be welcoming that young person back to the education provision that they've left, that there's then a real gap that we create by doing some of that repair recovery work with the young person but not doing any with um, the people who are then going to be the primary network for that young person".*

The need for family to be present in the SCH was acknowledged by the majority of groups, and ideas were shared as to how to better maintain relationships between young people in SCHs and their families: "You could have an area where parents could come in, and family and friends could come in, and maybe they could have a kitchen and do cooking. You know, like, do activities, couldn't they, that they would do in a community setting". The benefit of providing a home setting will help with better transition out of the SCH and was also said to help with self-care and self-sufficiency. Participants wanted better consideration in design and placement of visitor spaces and location of visitor rooms.

These views align with and reinforce recent work of the Children's Commissioner, Ofsted, and the Care, Planning Case Review. The below recommendations of these parties similarly impute a Child-First ethos. The impact of being far from home was recently adumbrated in a 2019 Children's Commissioner report, which involved visiting 15 children's homes (including residential care homes, health providers, and residential schools) across the country to "ask what it is like to be uprooted and placed hundreds of miles away; what does it mean for friendships and relationships with family, and how does it affect a child's sense of belonging" [17]. Though the Children's Commissioner's research question is pertinent to distance, its findings are important in terms of the conceptual design of SCHs. Where distance is a practical reality for several of the most vulnerable children in our society, it is imperative that SCHs are designed to mitigate the impact of that distance. Children explained that they thought being located far from home was designed as a form of punishment [17], and a 14 year-old girl said, "I feel isolated, I don't even know where I am. . .. You feel like you have no one" [17]. Placements that are a considerable distance from family and friends may make frequent visitation and transitioning from SCH difficult [17].

Ofsted similarly highlighted the benefits of maintaining regular contact with family members as appropriate:

> *"The children have daily contact with those who are safe and important to them. One child said, 'We get to make calls to our family daily.' Parents, and other people who are important to the children, visit the home. This supports children in maintaining and/or rebuilding relationships with those who are important to them".* [63]

In this context, the Care, Planning Placement Case Review explains that, where possible, staff should ensure and support contact with the outside world, and therefore, the provision should be permeable with space for contact with families [63]. The value of relationships is important in supporting young people to develop the skills they will need when returning to their home communities, thereby supporting pathways from secure care. In practical terms, continuity of care is more likely where the young person is placed close to home.

5.2.3. Feels Like a Home

This was a card created on the Diamond9 board, but it also includes elements of the facilities and space cards. Two subthemes emerged within the general theme of "feels like home", highlighting the importance placed on homeliness in SCHS. The subthemes included the need to (i) balance homeliness and safety and (ii) normalise the space. Normality is emphasised in Child-First, with developing pro-social identity and minimal intervention at its core.

5.2.4. Balancing Homeliness and Safety

In terms of homeliness, participants noted that it is appropriate that priority is given to safety within the SCH, particularly in recognising the risks of self-injury, though this should not be perceived as mutually exclusive from homeliness. They explained building design must be safe, but there is a need to balance the "obsession with security" with the lived experience for the young people of being in a SCH. The challenge of fostering a homely environment was captured in the following quote from a participant:

> *"But then I think that brings up the difficulty of, you know, how do you balance a justice system with trying to be homely, like can't have blankets because it's health and safety. You can't have, you know, they have to wipeable surfaces and that kind of stuff. Like it's hard to make a space be homely whilst making it safe".*

Participants explained that minor changes, such as unbreakable glass, and fixed chairs, can provide reassurance to staff and make children feel safe, whilst not detracting from the homely environment. Participants also identified challenges in maintaining a homely atmosphere where there is jangling of keys and slamming of children's lockable cabinets and drawers. These are also symbols of institutionalised penal power within the environment that can undermine any attempt to achieve an environment that feels homely. This aligns with Child-First recommendations that suggest minimal intervention is preferable. One manager said the following:

> *"I still say that to my staff now, you know, because we have keys on lanyards, you know, I see somebody doing this [demonstrates rotating keys in air] I remove them and say, right, now you get round the building without having those keys. You have to ask somebody to open the door. And they're like, well. You're not a prison officer, stop winging them around. You have all the power, you can fob the doors".*

He explained how he was "trying to get away from this culture of the power of the key and understanding the power of that key and the impact that it has on a kid". Lockable doors themselves, however, are characteristic of an institution as opposed to a home. One participant stated the following:

> *"I think some of us would quite like to make it a bit more kind of homely as in to maybe one day we could have the young people can have their doors open and go into in and out of the kitchen as when they and things like that".*

This is a clear demonstration of the challenge of achieving an environment that feels homely and yet keeps children safe from each other and items that could be used to cause harm. However, as one manager explained, it is possible to create spaces within SCHs that allow children some freedom of movement, thereby mirroring more closely a home environment:

> *"And if they get on well with, say for example like that's one lounge and then you've got a pod of four rooms and then another pod of four rooms but there's a secure door in between them. Only staff can get through with young people, they don't have access to it. And then on that side there's another lounge but if a young person gets on really well with a young person on this pod, they can go into each other's lounges, kind of like mix up the space areas as well so they're not secluded to one thing".*

Participants also noted that the first impression of the SCH was important to the overall impression of homeliness. When a young person arrives at a SCH, they are often greeted with shutters, high walls and fences, and security provisions, and it can sometimes look run down and feel like a prison. While security features are important, it can make a young person feel uneasy about their new temporary home. A solution was suggested of sculptures and/or nice plants at the entrance, making walls seem less imposing or "hidden", and generally considering the first impression of the home from the eyes of a young person or through a Child-First lens. As one participant stated the following:

> *"And they're quite prison looking establishments, which actually, you know, if you're a child coming into that first. . . the one I worked in was awful with a perimeter fence, so when they're going in, probably feeling fear. If it's their first time, so it's about changing that image of a secure building from the very moment you drive into it to when you're leave or get inside. 'Cause you can be safe, a building can be safe, it doesn't need have to be custodial. I think that's the biggest problem with buildings as they are".*

The balance across personalisation and maintaining standards identified within focus group discussions was recently echoed in an inspection report by Ofsted:

> *"The home has a number of rooms that are personalised to the children, and it presents as homely, including the children's bedrooms. The children's artwork and photographs are displayed around the home. However, some rooms present as more clinical, and are uninviting. Some of the flooring in bathrooms have ingrained staining. Some lounge and bedroom windows have graffiti on the protective coverings. This detracts from the rest of the environment, which is of good quality".* [64]

Though redecorating a bedroom whenever a child moves into a SCH is impracticable given the short length of stays, involving young people in the appearance of their rooms may reduce damage and allow for a smoother transition into the SCH. The data suggest that vinyl stickers that are personalised and/or aligned to children's interests are inexpensive, quick to apply, and removable without damage, meaning that all children can personalise their space in a cost-effective way. Displaying photographs and children's artwork can also assist in creating a more homely environment. The design should consider using swipe cards or fobs rather than keys. The use of soft-close hinges or felt on the inside of lockable cabinets and drawers, for example, is likely to be experientially different from doors and drawers slamming shut. Similarly, innovative lighting solutions that mimic daylight and décor that reflects the landscape may assist in creating a more homely environment.

Stakeholders further highlighted issues with balancing the homeliness of the SCH and the required safety aspects when action needs to be taken. A SCH may feel nicer for the young people, but the design can cause issues when it comes to restraining a young person or a young person refusing to move from a space:

> *"We've got a lounge and all of the bedrooms are off there. Whereas a lot of the homes have corridors with bedrooms. And ours works lovely for being homely. But if you've got a young person who refuses to go to bed or to move and then that's the lounge gone for the rest of the kids. And it's a pain in the bum".*

To help deal with the issue of young people refusing to move from a space, it was suggested as a solution to have "walls that come down to separate the space". This means that the young person can be separated into a different space and it does not limit the rest of the use for the other young people. A participant, however, did have that in their own SCH, but it is temporary material and could be easily kicked through. There was also the

difficulty of how to keep the young person in the space and potentially restraining them when putting the wall up. It also meant that some bedrooms were also cut off, meaning that at the time the wall was up, some young people could not access their own private space. The temporary wall, therefore, was not used regularly. Designing of common rooms to prevent isolating other space/young people is a complex issue, and what may seem like a quick fix to a spacing issue can actually cause additional problems.

Other issues of the building design and space that can impact safety were tight corridors and bedrooms, which can cause difficulties for staff when retraining. Sometimes these issues are caused by a redesign of the space that made it smaller or more awkward to work in, with an example of bedrooms redesigned with unbreakable material, reducing space significantly enough that a young person cannot be restrained in it. This is why it is so important that staff are involved in any redesign processes:

> *"Until you've restrained a child, until you've been involved in those high-risk situations, in terms of design and knowing what the challenges are in terms of that space, you know, you can't imagine it, can you? You can't imagine what just a tweak of the room might help".*

If staff aren't involved, it means they are "always having to make up for design faults in operational practice" that could have been avoided had there "been a few more heads" on it. A range of stakeholders need to be involved in the process, as "from an architect perspective, it's the right room, from a practice point of view, it doesn't work".

Overall, both aspects of homeliness and safety are important, but they are not mutually exclusive. Though safety of the young people and staff is imperative to the functioning of the home, there are still ways to make it homely and balance it with safety and security. One aspect of this that is apparent from the data is that staff should be involved in any (re)designs to ensure that the space is workable for restraint and movement of the young people.

5.2.5. Normalising the Space

Focus groups highlighted the importance of normalising the space, referring to feelings of natural light and space, as well as the function of the building to allow for everyday activities to develop life skills and family visits. In a Child-First context, the extent to which normality supports the development of skills for transition and the future should not be underestimated. One example of empowering children to take ownership of the space while at the same time developing skills is captured in the below extract:

> *"I even let one of the YPs paint the art room because they weren't happy with how the art room looked. So we ripped it all down, ripped all the displays down and I said, well you design it, you create it, it's your space, you do what you want in this room. And we spent the day just painting it, it was brilliant. Just seeing them having ownership over something and something that they can call as theirs is lovely. But I just give them that little stepping stone in what to do, showing them many techniques and skills. That's what makes it fun".*

Focus group participants also highlighted the importance of access to outside space and wanted more access to nature for their residents. Inside or outside, there was a consensus that the space should foster independence, for example, growing vegetables outside, and should include nudges regarding day-to-day activity, such as hanging up a towel. The concept of "walking to school" was important for providing separation from the home and educational elements of life within a SCH. Having a route outside the SCH to school provides an activity that is reflective of life in their local community and provides some normality for them.

In terms of designing spaces so that they are homely and replicate normal living, participants highlighted how important it is that a range of stakeholders are involved: "It just goes to show that you do need experts when you're talking about building and stuff like that, because it's not as easy as just painting it whatever colour you feel like". It is important for young people to have a say in what the space they live in looks like, but it

is also necessary to engage experts who can advise on what is appropriate and adaptable. Making it homely is not just "putting a poster on the wall". A difficulty outlined, however, is that what young people like in terms of decoration can change quite quickly, so the space must be flexible to change. There is a quite a big difference between what a 10-year-old likes and what a 17-year-old likes, and preferences between genders can vary as to decor. This can make it difficult to determine the best way to make the SCH space homely.

Though focus groups recognised the need to normalise the space, normal in this context is polysemic, and it is essential to consider what "normalising" the space means to the young people residing there. It is also important to consider the challenges of "normalising" a space for which the public often have little appreciation. For young people travelling to a SCH potentially in a different part of the country, they may not know what to expect. Accordingly, the concept of "normalisation" ought to begin during the secure transportation of vulnerable children to the Secure Children's Home [65], for example, by providing information on what the SCH looks like during the journey. Empowerment of children is also important given the level of restriction they experience. The statutory guidance states that children should have some say in the welcome literature and inducting new children to the home environment [66]. Further children's involvement in the literature might assist in reducing the overemphasis on security in communications. In essence, what is important to the child might differ considerably to the focus of key workers and staff, whose primary concern is the safety of the children, though children do explain that they understand the need to be in the SCH and that it keeps them safe [65].

6. Flexible and Adaptive to Changing Needs

This theme was identified in the Diamond9 and the Solution Sketchpad. It was acknowledged that children have changed and their care needs have changed also. This can be achieved with better design and build to allow for flexibility and adaptivity.

6.1. The Need for Flexibility of the Space

Participants viewed children as presenting with more complex needs than in the past and explained that these complexities mean that children need the environment to be flexible to their needs, with one participant saying, "You have got to design something that has potential for change quite quickly". Some participants highlighted that the buildings were built some time ago, usually as a school or similar institution, and they now must try and adapt what they have: "You're using an old building that will have been built for a different purpose. And we've come a long way from the 80s". The changing needs of young people and how this is managed can be impacted by the design and build of the SCH:

> *"I'm stuck with what I've got and it doesn't work. And that the environment is now stopping us from managing. . . the children that are coming now are more complex than they were. . .the complexities of children are needing far more from our environments than we need to be able to give them".*

6.2. Spaces Which Do Not Meet the Needs of the Child Are Antithetical to the Child-First Agenda

One participant, however, did ask, "I know we're saying complexities are going up, but what is it that we are doing, are we just responding to it differently?" And one way to respond to this is more in-depth consideration for the environment the young people live in. Frequently, the buildings that are being used were formerly schools that have now been changed into a SCH and added onto over the years, and this has resulted in a non-purpose-built or designed SCH that is no longer fit for purpose, and features such as lighting are not adequate. One participant reported that they would be able to give "so much input into what you wanted and needed, because you knew what you wanted and needed". Drawing on the lived experiences of those working in SCHs in the design of new buildings is vital to ensure longevity and flexibility to change in response to changing needs. A manager who was able to provide input into the design of their SCH explained the process of visiting

multiple and varied secure settings to inform their design recommendations. Taking inspiration and best practice from multiple sources was identified as key, but what is also needed is the "luxury" of time to review plans to avoid any design mistakes or flaws:

> *"Well, is it more about the flexibility of the space? Because you could say the problem's the size, but you just build bigger, you know, you find a big plot. But once you've got your plot and the building, it's the flexibility of the space".*

Hart and La Valle similarly identified that the space should be flexible enough to adapt to meet diverse needs of young people taking into consideration the different pathways—welfare or justice—through which young people might access a SCH [24]. In particular, there is a significant cost implication with under-occupancy in SCHs, which potentially increases the likelihood that pathways of entry may expand over time. Occupancy issues can arise when children with contrasting needs, behaviours, and (gang) affiliations cannot be accommodated together, which leads to waiting lists despite there being empty beds. The occupancy rate throughout 2023 was 60% of the total number of places approved [66]. Under-occupancy may be due to either staff shortages, places contracted out to the YCS that cannot be used for welfare placements, or because it is perceived that the individual needs of the child seeking a placement are not suitable/cannot be supported where a bed is available. Where under-occupancy is due to staff shortage, the design of the build is unlikely to assist, but where it is a consequence of an individual child's needs, this could be pre-empted in the design stage of the build.

The design, therefore, needs to be flexible to allow for more or less mixing. If a child needs to be placed in single separation, the space should be flexible enough to accommodate with as little disruption as possible. Participants indicated that the environment also needs to be able to meet diverse needs, such as keeping children at risk of self-injury safe, and should include therapeutic space to facilitate access to specialist support. In addition to purpose-built rooms, for example, for teaching, bedrooms, neurodiverse needs, etc., breakout rooms could be considered since such rooms are, by their nature, versatile and can readily be adapted for purpose.

7. Discussion: Learning from Existing Practice and Recommendations

Our findings demonstrate that the Child-First lens is not only applicable to criminal justice settings. Adopting its central tenets across secure care generally will help to address some of the key concerns identified by stakeholders. The focus shifts to seeing these children as children irrespective of the route through which they accessed secure care; emphasizes the importance of developing a pro-social identity for positive child outcomes irrespective of the complexities of the individual circumstance; and encourages a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers by ensuring that positive connections are fostered and/or maintained.

Participants attribute the success of secure children's homes to various factors. One of the critical factors is the physical and social environment in which the children live. The participants emphasised the need for a well-designed physical space that includes appropriate resources, lighting, and space to promote the well-being and rehabilitation of the children. The first impression of the building is important and can impact on how the young person feels about their new temporary home. Other solutions were put forward, such as having glass that is reinforced but does not look reinforced and having movable walls to create separate spaces when there is an issue with a young person, but the staff does not want to exclude other young people fully from the space. These options, however, come with costs, and while they may be good solutions, it was stated that budgets would not stretch that far. These changes to the physical environment would help to implement and embed Child-First principles by ensuring a reconceptualisation of the central objectives of SCHs away from regulating children and young people's behaviour to supporting the interests and welfare of those children.

One of the main issues discussed was balancing Ofsted regulations with the restraints with which SCHs must comply. One example given included wanting better trauma-

informed spaces, but Ofsted restrictions on the use of stairs means it is not possible to provide the space to move around the building more. One participant posed the following: "The main question is, we're talking about buildings aren't fit for purpose anymore, are Ofsted's regulations fit for purpose anymore? Because as we work with children differently can the spaces look differently now against their regulations?" There was a general call across groups for a review of Ofsted regulations to bring them up to date with the care needs of young people in SCH and for more guidance from Ofsted during design and build. This emphasis on regulatory adherence conflicts with the Child-First imperative of supporting the child's development and promoting the child assuming a constructive role in society.

The speakers also stressed the importance of normalising experiences for children in care, such as mixing boys and girls and welfare and custodial youngsters and doing "life" activities, to prepare them for reintegration into the community. There is a need to normalise the space so that young people are equipped for when they leave the SCH and to balance this priority with ensuring the space does not fully feel like a secure setting. Other suggestions included designs that allowed young people to "walk to school" in the SCH, so they feel a separation between home and school.

Further, there was concern about the physical suitability of buildings for vulnerable and traumatised children, which may affect the capacity of these homes to provide care. Ideas were suggested such as sensory and chill-out rooms, where young people can learn how to relax, though it was pointed out that they will not have this when they leave the SCH. A minority questioned whether we are making spaces too "luxurious" for those who are in a SCH for justice and whether there need to be separate spaces for justice and welfare to account for this ostensible issue. However, other participants emphasised that current systems do not differentiate between different types of secure institutions, such as Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) and other secure estates. This lack of differentiation impacts funding and leads to problems with transition and resettlement for children. The staff working in SCHs also see collaboration and communication between homes as crucial in effectively tracking children after discharge. Participants drew on other SCHs as models to follow. Many cited the Adel Beck SCH as an exemplar in terms of design. A reason for this was the SCH manager being heavily involved in the design and build and being able to specify what was needed. Some participants asked for more sharing between SCHs as to good practice and that they be more open about what works well and what does not. A Child-First approach is one that involves a holistic, individualistic, tailored approach delivered through universal services based on a child's welfare needs that focusses on their strengths and future aspirations, focussing on developing the child's pro-social identity to empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society. This necessarily involves a joined-up and collaborative approach. Adopting a Child-First lens would therefore offer the potential to overcome the barriers to collaboration. Child-First is underpinned by the principles of promoting positive behaviours and outcomes, diversion, engagement, legitimacy, and evidence-based partnership and making adults responsible for explicitly promoting pro-social, positive outcomes for children and minimising the child's exposure to risk [67].

Reviewing best practice and learning from challenges by visiting existing provision is likely to be beneficial. The small number of SCHs provides a unique opportunity to review all extant provision and to compare those adapted for use to those built for purpose. Review of extant provision that outlines the key benefits and challenges associated with the built environment would not only assist in developing SCHs but also in lifting the veil of secrecy that appears to pervade SCHs. This would support broader understanding of the built environment in which these young people reside [68] and feeds into our previous recommendation regarding the need to normalise the space [69].

8. Conclusions

The Youth Justice Board (YJB) is advocating for a Child-First redesign of the secure estate for children, which should be care-focused, help enable pro-social identity, use trauma-informed practice, and be needs-led [26]. We agree that the Child-First approach should be applied to all situations where children are placed in secure care and should not be confined to children detained on criminal justice grounds. The results of this research, therefore, support the (former) government's initiative to close all Young Offender Institutions and Secure Training Centres. The YJB envisages the new secure school Oasis Restore as a promising example of a new era of youth justice provision, but our findings suggest that these institutions are still too big (Oasis Restore holds 49 children) to fully realise a Child-First ethos.

Participants attribute the success of SCHs to various factors. One of the critical factors is the physical and social environment in which the children live. The conversation surrounding children within the secure setting also highlights the challenges of transition and resettlement and, in line with "Child-First", equipping children to make such transitions.

Participants emphasised the need for a well-designed physical space that includes appropriate resources, lighting, and space to promote the well-being and rehabilitation of the children. With the complexity of needs among children in care increasing, there is also a call for more robust and flexible support systems. The participants stressed the importance of normalising experiences for children in care, such as mixing boys and girls and welfare and custodial youngsters, to prepare them for reintegration into the community. There is a concern, however, regarding the physical suitability of buildings for vulnerable and traumatised children, which may affect the capacity of these homes to provide care.

We advocate that SCHs should adopt a Child-First lens when designing secure homes for children across welfare and justice placements.

In terms of the design and build of SCHs, our empirical research engaging core stakeholders across London and the West Midlands in focus groups aligns with Dwyer's international study. Accordingly, SCHs should have the following characteristics:

- be close to home to enable family involvement and continuity of care;
- feel like a home;
- be flexible and adaptive to changing needs.

In this respect, in SCHs, safety and homeliness should be viewed as compatible ideals. SCHs should be designed for flexible use. Efforts should be made to normalise the space. Local communities need to be educated as to the need and aims of SCHs to help with suitable locations of buildings and reintroduction for young people into their community. Finally, efforts should be made to learn from existing practice, particularly in terms of what works and does not work in the current design and build of SCHs.

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