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Evaluation of the New Horizon Youth Centre 'Youth Outreach Project': Final Report

Full report



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University of
Kent



New Horizon
Youth Centre

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About New Horizon Youth Centre

‘Youth Centre’ may be in our name, but we are so much more.

Every year, thousands of young people across the capital become homeless because of family breakdown, domestic abuse, poverty, experiences of violence, or war and persecution in their home country.

We are a vital support network for 16-24 year olds with nowhere else to go. Through the ‘one stop shop’ services we provide at our day centre and outreach we support thousands of young people experiencing homelessness in London to improve their wellbeing, change their economic circumstances and find somewhere that they can call home.

For as long as young people are homeless and vulnerable in London, we will be on a mission to give their potential a home.

We would like to thank the National Lottery Community Fund for their support of the project.



~~1.0~~ 1. Introduction

Data from the Home Office for England and Wales in June of 2019 shows an unprecedented rise in police recorded incidents of knife crime, with 44,076 knife offences recorded by the police over the year, an increase of 7% from 2018 (ONS 2019). Many of the victims of knife crime were young men from the poorest parts of the country, with London being an area that is particularly affected. London's 'knife crime epidemic' is a subject of national interest, dominating media headlines as the violence in the capital continues to grow, and calls for harsher sentences and punitive approaches have been suggested by many as a solution to this problem. The findings presented in this report suggest a 'law and order' approach to tackling serious youth violence is unlikely to work, as the problems that young people face are incredibly complex and, as such, require complex strategies to create meaningful change. There are no easy solutions to this complicated issue.

The increase in youth offending has many causes, but cuts to local services have had a devastating impact on young people in London (Sanders-McDonagh 2019). Figures from the Department of Education (2018) show that budgets for children's services, particularly for children at risk of abuse and neglect, dropped by 26% between 2015 and 2018. Budgets for children's centres across England have also decreased by 42%. At the same time, funding for both safeguarding services and for children in care increased by 10% during the same period, with charities like Action for Children (2018) suggesting that money is being used to "firefight" crisis situations rather than prevent putting vulnerable children at risk. Funding problems for schools in the poorest areas in England are also making the situation worse. Many of the schools in deprived neighbourhoods do not have the resources available to help children with complex needs, and excluding young people from school leaves them vulnerable to being drawn into criminal activity (c.f. Gill 2017).

Analysis from the YMCA England and Wales (2018) on cuts to youth services shows how local authorities are struggling to manage the reduction in funding from central government. The charity reports that spending across England and Wales has fallen by 61% between 2012 and 2018 and in London, the heart of the knife crime epidemic, spending on youth services has been slashed by 59% since 2010-11. The cuts to services like these have

left young people with very little support (both financial and emotional) and few options if they get into trouble or need help.

The New Horizon Youth Centre (New Horizon) model of working with young people offers some hope to what is a grim reality for many young people. This report explores findings from a three-year evaluation of services delivered by New Horizon, focusing specifically on their Youth Outreach Project (YOP). Research presented here suggests that third sector organisations such as New Horizon are well-placed to help young people who need support and advice, by offering options and opportunities that can transform lives completely. The evaluation findings highlight the unique model of youth work employed by New Horizon, demonstrating its efficacy in addressing the complex needs of young offenders, and making clear the impact of the project on reducing serious youth offending.

2. Background and Project Focus

The Youth Outreach Project (YOP) at the New Horizon Youth Centre (New Horizon) supports young people to reduce offending behaviour and make positive life choices through one-to-one support, drop-in services and group work sessions. -The project was delivered by New Horizon and was funded from 2016-2018 by the National Lottery Community Fund.

YOP provides open access to drop-in services, including accommodation advice and referrals, accredited education and training programmes, counselling, and music production workshops. One-to-one support is tailored-to-need and provided alongside group work to meet young people's needs. Life skills workers deliver a wide range of taster sessions and other activities for young people. Transitional workers provide outreach and pre-release support as well as one-to-one and group work with some young people (e.g. young women at risk; young men who are gang-affiliated). The project is London-wide and targets young people aged 15-25 in prison and young offender institutions, as well as those identified by referring agencies as high risk.

The aim of the evaluation was to understand the experiences of young people within the project (including high-, medium-, and low-risk clients), all of whom have complex needs. Specific indicators were set out by the National Lottery Community Fund to capture the impact of the project on young people, and on the safety of the wider London population. The research extended beyond these outcome measures, however, to try to better understand the impact of this unique youth model on a group of young people that are often difficult to reach. Using a mixed-method approach that produced rich accounts of the life-worlds of vulnerable young people, the research methodology facilitated the collection of robust data that extends our existing knowledge of the experiences of young people engaged in offending and serious youth violence.

3. Methodology

This piece of research evaluated the outcomes set out by the National Lottery Community Fund for assessing the impact of the YOP. A theory-driven approach to evaluating the project was employed (c.f. Pawson and Tilley 1997), which means social context matters when thinking about the impact of specific interventions on young people. This demands that the evaluation thinks about what works for which groups (and why or why not), rather than just consider ‘does it work?’. While New Horizon tracked individual-level indicators related to young people in the project, the wider evaluation sought to explore the project outcomes beyond the individual level to think about how salient the project was to young people (how much it mattered) and the ways in which these outcomes were met (the process of creating change).

- **Project Outcome One:** High-risk young offenders will have reduced re-offending rates and therefore an impact on improved community safety;
- **Project Outcome Two:** High-risk young offenders will have increased self-confidence and make positive choices to alter lifestyles;
- **Project Outcome Three:** High-risk young offenders will have improved employability skills and increase their take up of employment and training opportunities;
- **Project Outcome Four:** High-risk young offenders will have greater safety and better access to shelter and security.

This final report presents findings from questionnaires, interviews with clients, interviews with New Horizon staff, interviews with external stakeholders, and observations derived from an organisational ethnographic approach. The in-depth data presented here evidences the impact of change on young people and the community and details the ways in which they have made positive changes as a result of their involvement with the project.

Guidelines on research ethics as set out by the British Sociological Association were adhered to, and the Ethics Committee in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent reviewed and approved the research proposal and all documentation for the evaluation. All participants gave their informed consent to take part in the research, and all names and identifying details have been anonymised to protect their right to confidentiality.

A data-driven analytic approach was employed, and themes emerged from interviews and field notes that helped inform the development of theory (Glaser 1978; Charmaz 2001); this ensured that explicit and implicit meanings could be analysed and considered in relation to wider literatures around substantive areas.

3.1 Research with Young People

The aim of the evaluation was to explore the impact of the project on a wide range of young people. This included high-/medium-/low-risk clients, clients in prison or youth offending institutions, as well as clients in the community. A number of pre- and post-measures were considered for inclusion in the project, and originally introduced (including empirically supported measures that related to anger and aggression, violence, and social support), but these proved difficult to incorporate into the evaluation as young people were anxious about filling in questionnaires and it was felt the measures were counterproductive in helping young people. The simple scale that was originally introduced to measure social isolation was particularly troubling and was removed from the evaluation almost immediately as young people were so distressed by questions about levels of loneliness and (lack of) social support.

The primary source of data gathered to understand the experiences of young people came from observations carried out with staff over the three-year period. This included observations from the drop-in centre, from informal and formal meetings in the community, and during prison outreach at a range of youth offending institutions. Over 250 hours of observations with the YOP team were conducted during the evaluation period and informed the research findings significantly.

Informal interviews as well as formal semi-structured interviews were carried out with young men (n=97) to explore how relevant they found the service offered to them, and how effective the services were in helping them make better life choices (including reducing offending activities, incorporating risk-reduction strategies in their day-to-day lives, accessing appropriate services for issues related to physical and mental health, and helping with key issues such as housing, education and employment opportunities).

While most of the client group were young men with serious offending histories, a small number of women were also included in the research (n=5). Young women were much less likely to have serious offending backgrounds, but some had a long history with the police, or had been arrested for low-level offences which were often related to underlying mental health issues and/or issues arising from addiction issues. Many of these women grew up in deprived areas with high levels of youth offending and violence, and were sometimes dating or were related to young men known to be gang-affiliated. It would be inaccurate to suggest that these young women could be classified as 'girl-gangs' (c.f. Batchelor 2009 and Young 2009 for more on the problems with this term), but the impacts of living in areas known for violence and their connections to young men who were known to be gang-involved often left them in precarious positions. Due to the small number of female participants, the report

focuses more on issues related to young men and their experiences, but it is important to note that these issues affect young women as well.

Life history interviews were conducted with a sub-set of participants (n=58) and were used to explore changes across the life course of individual clients in order to better understand the trajectory of young people into offending behaviours. Using the biographical approach developed by McAdams (1985), the interviews with young people were not about trying to understand them as 'criminals' by focusing on particular crimes or activities; rather, the interviews allowed them to describe key moments across their lives, and gave them the opportunity to talk about a wide range of issues, including events that they felt might impact their offending (and re-offending) as well as their well-being more generally.

McAdams and Guo (2015) argue that life history interviews allow research participants to focus on their inner experiences over a long period of time, and reflect on the ways in which important moments of situations from their lives (particularly their early lives) may facilitate a deeper understanding of their current behaviour. The strength of this approach lies in the unambiguous emphasis on the point of view of the participant and understanding the complex social relations that have brought the young person to the YOP project. While participants were able to direct much of the conversations themselves according to what they felt was most important, a number of directed questions were used to help structure the interview. Young people were asked to start the interview by recounting their very first memory; these first memories were often revealing, as trauma, loss, and violence emerged as key features of their early years. Participants were then asked questions about the following issues: family life and childhood experiences, school and educational experiences, mental and physical health and well-being, drug and alcohol use, criminal histories and interactions with police, experiences of engaging with other services (e.g. social work, probation, etc.). After talking through these experiences, participants were also asked to reflect on how they came to be involved with the YOP as a result of their life histories, and how they thought YOP had influenced them.

Life history interviews meant that it was possible to capture the complexity of their lives and understand the importance of seemingly small changes they made or would make as a result of their engagement with YOP. The aim of the interviews was to assess the extent to which participants felt that YOP had helped them in some way, if at all, but also invited young people to reflect critically on the services offered, to think about whether their offending activities had changed as a result of the project.

In line with many feminist researchers (Ribbons and Edwards 1998; Skeggs 2002) who call for a more ethical approach, thinking through potential power imbalances in the

researcher/researched relationship, as Principle Investigator (PI) I felt it was important to share elements of my own history (if the participants asked) in order to reciprocate the personal and often difficult memories and experiences they proffered. This did not extend to personal information that would pose a threat to my safety (e.g. details about my home address or where my children attend school, etc.) but I often shared my first childhood memory, information about my own experience of being raised by a single mother in impoverished conditions, or details about what it was like growing up in America. Establishing rapport through reciprocity and giving something back to my participants meant that the interview data was richly detailed and explored a wide range of domains that helped get a better sense of the lives of the young people in the project. Names and identifying details of all participants have been changed to protect their anonymity, and participants were given the option of having interviews recorded. In some cases, no notes were taken during the interviews (particularly in prisons where there were concerns that notes about our conversations might be confiscated) and real names of participants or details of the participants are not recorded or written anywhere. Notes from interviews with sensitive details were written in code to further protect their anonymity.

3.2 Research with Stakeholders and Professionals

In addition to interviews with young people, the research team also carried out semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the YOP team and a number of associated New Horizon staff working on the project, as well as relevant public and third sector stakeholders (n=35).

These include:

- Civil servants including probation services, prison and youth offending institution staff, and Job Centre Plus staff;
 - Borough level statutory service staff, with a particular focus on staff from London boroughs with a high number of young people involved in serious youth offending, including social workers, housing workers, gangs workers, and other social care staff;
 - Third sector workers from a range of organisations that work with vulnerable young people, young offenders, and young people known to be gang-affiliated;
 - Staff from across New Horizon including management, staff from the Youth Outreach Project, and a wide range of staff that work with young people via the drop-in services.
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These interviews were carried out in an effort to understand some of the wider context as well as organisational issues that might impact on service delivery. Participants gave informed consent and were able to withdraw from the research at any time. They were also given the opportunity to speak 'off record' and the details of these 'off record' conversations have helped shape the research but do not appear in any written reports and were not transcribed. Qualitative interviews with professional staff reached theoretical saturation (Dey 1999) and repeat interviews were conducted with New Horizon staff to ensure that reactions to staff changes and process changes (e.g. the appointment of a new director, introduction of new risk assessment tools, etc.) were incorporated.

3.3 Researching Organisational Issues

To supplement the findings from the qualitative research, an organisational ethnographic approach was employed in order to better understand the complex situations of the young people and the difficulties that YOP staff have in helping them (Gellner and Hirsch 2001; Yanow 2009). The PI accompanied the YOP team on their visits to different young people including clients in the community, clients at the drop-in centre, and young men in prison (either on legal visit or as part of a wing visit). This approach allowed for a more engaged understanding of the YOP working practices and helped identify organisational and logistical challenges that impact on the efficacy of the project. In essence, this ethnographic approach functioned as a type of mobile interview, gathering information about young people and about the project itself in real time. This approach has been used previously in work with hard-to-reach populations (c.f. Sanders-McDonagh and Neville 2012) and has proven invaluable for engagement with particularly vulnerable groups.

4. Findings

The following sections explore some of the key issues highlighted by young people and stakeholders in the interviews, and include some findings from ethnographic observations. This section on young people focuses particularly on major problems they faced in making positive changes, and the ways that the YOP team helped them. This report also considers the ways in which the organisational ethos and specific processes and practices help support staff and keep them safe, which allows them to work as effectively as possible with high-risk clients.

4.1 Key Issues for Young People

Most of the young people interviewed were young offenders with a significant offending history, and had been or were currently incarcerated. Most of them were young men (roughly 96% of the sample), and many of the young men that took part in the evaluation had committed both violent and non-violent offences. Most had been incarcerated at least once (more than 95% of the sample) in either a youth offending institution or an adult prison for a range of offenses (often drug related). The average age of first arrest was 15 years old, and almost 50% of the sample had received their first caution by the police before the age of 13.

Young people were referred to the project through a number of routes – prison outreach by YOP staff was very effective in establishing initial contact with young offenders, and young people were referred to the project by prison or probation staff, gang workers, or other third and public sector workers. The YOP team were seen to be effective at engaging young people, and interviews with stakeholders were overwhelmingly positive. Their ability to collaborate and work effectively with a wide range of agencies, both in the statutory and third sector, is inevitably part of the reason the project works so well.

While most of the young people had offending histories, they were also often victims of violence themselves. A significant proportion of young people had experienced physical and/or emotional abuse as children, with almost all of the young people reporting either witnessing or directly experiencing violence as a child (more than 80% of the sample). Some had been victims of child abuse (both physical and sexual) while others had witnessed domestic violence in their homes. Most young people interviewed had left school before the age of 16 (more than 75% of the sample), and the majority had been suspended or excluded from school (more than 95% of the sample), leaving them more vulnerable to becoming

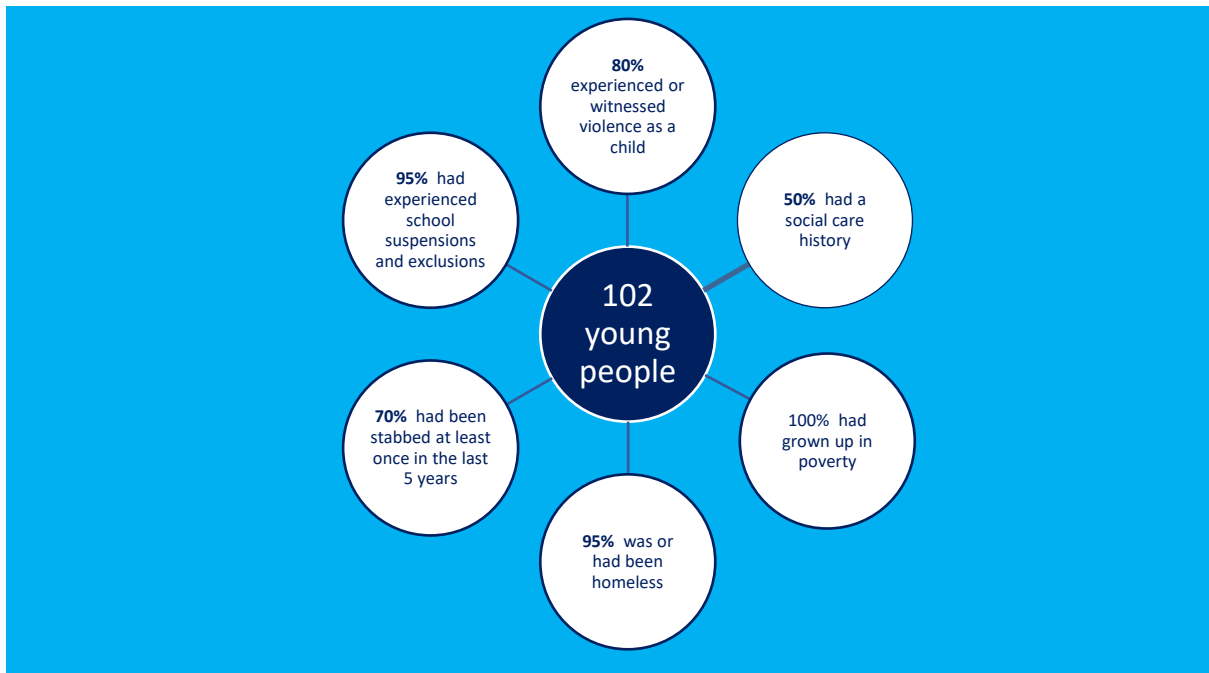


Figure one – Indicators of vulnerability of the participants

involved with gang-related activities. Many had been victims of violence from other young offenders, and many had been stabbed at least once during the past five years (c. 70% of the sample).

While most of young people in the study had experienced serious events as children that would almost certainly have required intervention from a social worker, only 50% of the sample had been in the care system or had worked with a social worker due to family problems. Some participants talked openly about growing up with parents who had addiction or mental health issues, although this was not something that was discussed in every interview. All of the participants had grown up in poverty, and many of them spoke about not having enough to eat at various points in their lifetime. A recent report from the Children’s Commissioner (2018) on children and vulnerability highlights each of these factors as being critically important in understanding the negative outcomes for vulnerable children, and when more than one of these factors is present, the risks to children are even greater, and can lead to children becoming involved in gang activities or engaging in violent offending.

There were a number of common features amongst the participants that are outlined below, and which emerged across the sample as being important to helping them make positive changes to their lives.

4.1.1. Housing and safety

Over 95% of the sample was or had been homeless (this includes sleeping rough, couch surfing, and sleeping in homeless shelters), and some of the young people were currently being housed in hostel accommodation. The young people who had been housed in safe places for sustained periods of time were better able to make positive choices about their futures, while those who were still homeless or living in temporary shelter had a much more difficult time in accessing services, in staying engaged with services, and with continuing or furthering positive changes that they had made. Housing emerged in almost every single interview as a pressing issue, and this concern was echoed by the New Horizon staff, as well as by external stakeholders.

Many young people had strained relationships with their families, either because of difficult childhood

“The young people who had been housed in safe places for sustained periods of time were better able to make positive choices about their futures”

experiences or sometimes as a result of their offending backgrounds (although these issues were often related). In some cases, young people still in the community were not welcome at their family home because they were involved in selling drugs or in serious youth violence. For those in prison, there was an awareness that it would be impossible for many of them to return home after they were released for similar reasons and, as such, leaving prison was a time of particular stress and anxiety for young people if they did not have a place to go after release. The YOP team were frequently able to help young people find safe housing, giving low- and medium-risk clients the opportunity to be more settled and meaning high-risk clients could experience stability which helped with accessing training and educational opportunities. High-risk clients and prison leavers were able to move away from areas where they were at risk of violence or reoffending, and both groups could then start to make meaningful changes to their lives.

Ben: The first thing [X] did (when I was released from prison) was made sure she got me accommodation... I moved to a homeless house which takes in homeless kids and that, stayed there for a month, then I went to a hostel in [London borough]. I stayed there for a month, that weren't bad, as well, got me out of my shell and that, erm, and then from then I got my own place, my own credential, well not my own place, a shared room like a flat. I got house mates and if there I'm stabling myself, saved myself a bit of money.

Interviewer: Ok, so getting a place to stay, was that important for you?

Ben: *Very important*, because of one thing I knew... I said if I'm really gonna stop all this stuff and I'm go on the other side - it's what I call it, the other side - so, if I'm doing this I've got to evolve and I gotta get better and stuff so it's what I done, but I wouldn't have done that without having a place to stay first and I wouldn't have done that without [X] helping me do that.

Having a safe place to stay was critical in terms of young people being able to move towards making positive changes, and this was an issue that faced almost every single client in the evaluation. It is hard to underestimate the importance of housing security for this vulnerable population, and it is clear from their interviews that having someone help navigate what was seen as a complicated and sometimes overwhelming process helped establish trust. Moving into safe accommodation also gave clients the emotional space to start thinking about going to 'the other side' – in this case moving away from selling drugs and getting involved in training and work. In their study of the impacts of homelessness on reoffending, Lutze et al. (2014) suggest that finding long-term housing solutions for high-risk offenders helped reduce recidivism, and had a positive impact on issues related to community safety, and the findings from the evaluation clearly echo this.

Many clients had been in the care system before the age of 16 and local boroughs had a duty of care to ensure they were housed until they reached the age of 25. Observations across the evaluation made clear that this duty of care was often breached, with clients often having to secure legal help to ensure they received the support to which they were entitled. Interviews with stakeholders highlighted this issue as a 'crisis' – with the most precarious not being able to access housing, leaving them incredibly vulnerable. In some instances local authorities went to court despite knowing they had a statutory duty of care, often because there was such a severe shortage of housing in the local area. The housing crisis is clearly part of the problem, but some stakeholders suggest that not recognising young offenders as victims or in need is also part of the issue. One third sector organisation highlighted the problems they experience:

Michaela: Housing is the biggest challenge, that's something the young people seem to reflect even if you talk to young men in prison, the idea that if they could just come out and get housing that it would be much easier. So things have definitely gotten worse because everything is through local connection. You have local authorities who are quite happy to do reciprocal and some that don't. Some of the young people would have police records, some won't, so if you present to the council someone with a history of extreme violence, who has been a victim of multiple stabbings but no police record, it's not going to work. They're going to say come back when you've got something to show us then we'll look into it.

The YOP team act as liaisons between local authorities and young people and are able to access a wide range of networks across London, and in this sense, finding suitable housing for high-risk clients has a positive impact on all four of the key evaluation outcomes.

In an interview with another third sector housing organisation, the key worker comments on the importance of giving kids a new start in a new place where they can be supported:

Alexis: I mean a lot of the New Horizon kids come from [a London location] and coming to [other London location] is a chance for them to kind of have a new life. I've had a few actually, and one in particular, it's like erm, you can see the child wonder in his face, because it's like he gets to breathe for the first time without having to put on this mask of being a gangster. He can be himself.

Ethnographic observations done with young people attending housing appointments with

“if you present to the council someone with a history of extreme violence, who has been a victim of multiple stabbings but no police record, it's not going to work. They're going to say come back when you've got something to show us then we'll look into it.” (Michaela, third sector agency)

local authorities reveal the difficulties that young people face with some statutory services. In one instance, the initial appointment took almost three hours to complete (one hour spent waiting for the appointment, two hours

spent speaking to two different housing case workers because there was confusion about the case), ultimately taking another two appointments before a solution was found.

New Horizon were often able to locate a place to stay for young people and worked with a wide range of local authorities to do this, by facilitating either formal or informal reciprocal arrangements across different boroughs. In cases where young people were at risk in their own boroughs but no reciprocal arrangement was in place, the result was that young people were effectively left homeless, creating real crisis situations for high-risk offenders. In these situations, YOP would pay for young people to stay in a hostel or hotel to make sure they were not in danger; this is not only economically unsustainable, it also fails to give young people a sense of stability and security in a time of emergency. In some cases, young people would often only stay for a short while in hostels or hotels, and would eventually tire of the uncertainty and return to their local area, even if it was known to be dangerous for them or their families. Ensuring that all local authorities work together to address this situation is critically important for keeping young people safe and giving them the best chance to make positive changes.

For some young men, particularly those who were gang involved, ensuring that they were housed in a safe place in another borough or area was crucial to ensuring they could make a fresh start. Finding safe housing in a borough away from former gang members is critically important both for keeping young people safe, and for helping them exit gangs (c.f. MOPAC 2014 for more on resourcing gang exit activities). One young person noted that his YOP worker was his main source of support when leaving the area he had known all his life, a prospect he found daunting:

David: With [X] it feels like she's listening to you and she's like taking you in, do you know what I mean? There's nothing I've ever asked her for like, she hasn't gone down with me in depth, made me think about what's gonna happen, do you know what I mean? But in my situation, I can only talk about my situation, but even people who like, come from my situation, 'cause I'm not the only one that's been in that scenario. People from, people from like, my area, my type of upbringing, you can't leave that area without a lot of support do you know what I mean? And [X] has been my support.

This also relates to issues of loneliness and social isolation, which will be picked up later in the report.

4.1.2 Mental Health

Many of the young people were experiencing significant mental health issues.¹ For those in the community that had exited gangs or who had faced extreme violence, diagnoses of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and/or depression were made in situations where they were able to successfully access a mental health professional. However, only a small number of the young people had accessed counselling or GP services as a result of their interactions with the YOP team, particularly because there was a great deal of difficulty in accessing appropriate help at times when young people needed the most help.

Those who had been in or were currently in prison described feeling particularly anxious or depressed during their incarceration, particularly in institutions where staffing levels were

¹ Many of the young people did not have a formal diagnosis, but many spoke about feelings of depression and anxiety as common features of their daily lives and many displayed behaviours consistent with Attention Deficit Disorder. PTSD was a common diagnosis for the sample population, but in most cases young people were not seeking help from mental health professionals for this condition.

low. Many young people had attempted to access mental health provisions while they were incarcerated, but were unable to get appointments or did not have consistent follow-up to get the help they needed. This made it difficult for the YOP team to really support young people with mental health issues while they were in prison. The significant incidences of mental health problems within the prison system in England and Wales are well known and supported by a growing body of evidence. In 2017, 40% of the prison population were deemed to be at risk of anxiety or depression, and figures suggest those prisoners whose mental health/wellbeing needs were not addressed were more likely to go on to reoffend (National Audit Office 2017), making this a particular source of concern.

“Many young people had attempted to access mental health provisions while they were incarcerated, but were unable to get appointments or did not have consistent follow-up to get the help they needed.”

Additionally, it was clear that many young people had undiagnosed mental health issues that made it difficult for the YOP team to work effectively with them,

especially in cases of extreme mental health crises (e.g. psychotic breakdowns). In one case, a young person who had attempted suicide a number of times had been refused care from the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services in his local area because he was using marijuana to self-medicate. This young person was left in crisis with no statutory help, and New Horizon were the only organisation that stepped in to provide support.

As previously noted, a significant proportion of the sample had experienced some form of violence in their childhood. Moore et al. (2013: 864) suggest that in order to effectively work with young offenders, it is important to “comprehensively assess child abuse and neglect among young offenders in order to provide appropriate treatment in custody and post-release”. They also note that children with a history of abuse are more likely to suffer from PTSD. Fox et al. (2015) argue that there is a correlation with offending and child abuse/maltreatment, maintaining that “each additional adverse experience a child experiences increases the risk of becoming a serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offender by 35, when controlling for other risk factors for criminal behaviour” (Fox et al. 2015: 163). Additionally, in a report for the Children’s Commissioner, Hughes et al. (2012) make clear that young people with neurodisabilities, including learning disabilities/difficulties, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and brain injury, increase these risks. They highlight the importance of screening young offenders for these issues to ensure that appropriate interventions are put in place to help young offenders. In one interview in prison with a young offender, I noticed that he found it almost impossible to sit down and was often moving or losing focus as we talked. I asked him if he had even

been tested for ADHD. He told me:

Kelvin: Yeah one of my foster moms asked to get me tested and I think they took me to see someone but I can't really remember. I got tested for dyslexia too so I know I've got that – but I got excluded way before my GCSEs anyways so it didn't really make much difference.

Only a small handful of the young men I spoke to over the three years had even been tested for ADHD, despite this being a well-known issue amongst male prison populations (c.f. Eme 2009).

While many had experienced severe childhood trauma that might warrant an investigation into potential psychological issues such as detachment disorders or even personality disorders, these had rarely been done. Diagnoses of these conditions are controversial and in some cases do more harm than good (c.f. Herpetz et al. 2017). However, understanding the psychological issues that young people face was useful for helping to develop appropriate strategies that worked to help clients in the best way possible. One third sector worker noted:

Matthew: In [London location] gang project, they have a clinical psychologist in their team who help them develop a plan of work. We have a long-term client that we work with who we know has issues – we thought maybe schizophrenia or bipolar but we got him to see a really good clinical psychologist recently who diagnosed him with [XX] personal disorder... That helps us because before we might try to do something that would work with most of our clients but didn't seem to help him at all – but we have a better understanding of the underlying issues so can adapt what we do and it's really so much easier now and we really get what's going on. We can work with the YOP team together now in a much more coordinated way which is good for everyone.

Many young people had been victims of serious violence as a result of their offending activity, including being stabbed, beaten, kidnapped, forced to carry drugs or weapons in ways that put them at risk. They also experienced psychological trauma, especially if they were selling drugs in an area where there were known to be incidents of violence with young people from areas close by. Almost all participants had witnessed stabbings and beatings, while others had watched their friends die. In an interview with one young person, when I asked if he had even seen anyone being physically hurt in front of him, he told me:

Dwayne: Look, I'm not proud of it, alright, but I've seen things you can't even begin to imagine. In [undisclosed area] I watched a crackhead beat to death when I was 13. I could hear his bones smashing when they were

kicking him and I almost threw up. But years later I'm doing the same kinda thing – not to crackheads 'cause I'm not like that, but if you want to play the game you need people to respect you. You do what you gotta do.

Abram et al. (2004) suggest that young offenders who have witnessed or experienced violence are more likely to suffer from PTSD than the general population and argue that specific and targeted mental health interventions need to be developed to help young people in order to reduce the risk of reoffending. As a significant proportion of YOP clients have been exposed to incidents of violence, it was important that they were able to trust the YOP workers. Many disclosed their histories of violence and were able to turn to the YOP team for help with mental health or emotional issues, and one young person noted:

Malcom: One of my first memories of working with X, there's this nice café at the end of the road that we would go and sit in. We'd just talk and I remember they did the nicest donuts and we'd always get a donut and a coffee or a cup of tea for our meetings. Just talking was the thing that got me through.

While YOP staff were an important source of support for young people and were seen as trustworthy, it is difficult to work effectively with clients who have mental health issues that are either undiagnosed, or are not being treated by a trained professional. Furthermore, the emotional impact of working with offending populations increases the risk of burn-out (c.f. Salyers et al. 2015). As a result of the recommendations in the interim report (Sanders-McDonagh 2018) the YOP team recently recruited a clinical psychologist and a counsellor to work with clients at the centre. In line with findings from Patton et al. (2009), having a clinical psychologist embedded in the team will hopefully allow for individualised programmes to be developed, improving outcomes related to reoffending for this group.

4.1.3 Increasing confidence and recognising achievements

All of the young people in the project said that their interactions with the YOP team had increased their confidence and their sense of self-worth. They identified the practical help that YOP had provided, and specifically mentioned help with accommodation, help with drugs and alcohol, help accessing health services (including mental health and sexual health services), help with engaging with other appropriate statutory services, and help in accessing/securing educational and training opportunities. It was clear from the interviews that every single young person that engaged with YOP had made better choices as a result of their interactions with the team. In many cases there were dramatic results, with young people moving away from violent offending completely, undertaking training or going back

to education to start completely fresh, and sustaining these changes. For others there were significant changes, moving away from violent offending and working towards qualifications that would help them start to make real changes. For some young people gaining basic educational certificates in subjects like maths or English was an incredible achievement and had a tangible impact on their self-esteem and confidence. Other young people were able to progress much further with some completing their undergraduate degrees at university, starting businesses and inspiring other young people to do the same.

While the success stories for these groups are incredible achievements, and a clear demonstration of how

“every single young person that engaged with YOP had made better choices as a result of their interaction with the team.”

successful New Horizon are at supporting young people, not all the participants were at a point where engaging in training or education was viable. This was sometimes because they were in insecure housing, sometimes because their mental or physical health needed to be attended to first, and in some cases because young people were still a risk to themselves, and/or to others. For young people who were still involved in gangs or offending behaviour, positive outcomes were more about ensuring they were taking precautions to keep themselves safe, encouraging them to reduce offending, and helping them find non-violent solutions to the problems they encountered. For some of the most entrenched offenders, seemingly small changes were incredibly important achievements. One young person who had recently been released from prison following a violent offence commented:

Interviewer: So where would you be if you hadn't worked with the YOP?

Patrick: Uh, I don't think I'd be here now. I would probably be in prison for murder or something.

Interviewer: So working with [X] meant you changed your behaviour?

Patrick: Yeah definitely. If I get a feeling like I want to do something I'd always call [X] and talk to her first. She calms me down and gets me to think about things differently. I'm not saying I've been perfect, you know? But I ain't killed anyone either and that's down to [X].

While some young people were still offending, there was a clear sense that they were able to speak to their worker in YOP at times of stress or when they were in crisis, and every participant indicated that they modified their behaviour as a result. While some of these modifications were sometimes very small, they were always moves towards engaging in less risky or violent activities.

4.1.4 Building trust

Being able to have someone in their lives whom they trusted was one of the most important elements that helped young people make better choices. Trusting relationships were invaluable for these types of clients, many of whom had experienced childhood trauma or violence and found it hard to trust anyone. For those selling drugs, the nature of the drugs market makes it difficult to trust even the closest of friends. In their world people often die, go to jail, move away, or sometimes just disappear. They had few expectations about being able to really trust anyone, and so building these genuinely trusting relationships was incredibly important for them as it meant they could really rely on someone to help them, sometimes for the very first time in their lives.

In some cases clients had worked with YOP for more than five years, and this meant that

“For many young people, having someone they could trust, who they felt genuinely cared about them and would not let them down was *the* most salient factor that helped them make positive changes in their lives.”

these relationships could be built over time with many positive outcomes for young people in the project. One particular client who had worked with the YOP for an

extended period of time commented on the importance of having a single point of contact to help him, and noted the importance of this relationship to changing his life:

Caleb: There are some things that I still do and what not, things that could get me in trouble, but, it's like I don't know, what err, what I used to do in the parks and before, except I changed a lot, nothing I do is harming anyone or anything like that you know what I'm saying. Yeah so, yeah I don't know I feel a lot better, I feel like a better person anyway as well. And yeah I feel like, I don't know like, I'm a lot closer to to to being a fully changed person and yeah, going to work every single day.

Interviewer: OK so you came out and you went into housing she helped you get a job, and are you working now?

Caleb: Erm not right now, I'm still waiting for my housing to be sorted, she also got me on a forklift course and then I done that and then I got a job through that as well and I was earning through that, so yeah. I also had some ASBO conditions where I weren't allowed a bike, which I couldn't get to work I couldn't do nothing, I couldn't get out. [X] helped me through support and that, and sorted them things so I'm allowed on my bike now so that's helped a lot yeah.

Interviewer: So it sounds like [X] has made a big difference and just kind of...

Caleb: Definitely I can see if [X] wasn't here I would've, I would've come out and I would've tried to do certain things, got frustrated and end up getting in trouble and getting recalled and then giving up to be honest. You know what I'm saying so, with [X] around and that, she's giving me that heart that where I know there's someone there that can help sort these things. You know what I'm saying, not like where everything I try and do didn't work on my side I've still got someone else that can try and push me you know what I'm saying, so yeah.

It is both the practical and the emotional support that helps these young people make changes, and every single young person who took part in an interview made clear that YOP had had a positive impact on their lives. It was clear that without this sustained emotional support, many young people would have disengaged with the project. One young person notes:

Interviewer: So [X] has helped with the course has she helped with anything else?

Mohammed: My job centre thing, universal credit or something like that, she helps me with that, she helps me start my claim, she's gonna come with me on Monday to the interview. So yeah she done, she does quite a lot I appreciate it. [Y] has been seeing me for the minute but yeah I've been working with [X] as well and she's the one that actually put me on the stock broking course, so yeah they both done well for me I think personally. Things like I maybe would have found very hard to do myself at that time it was especially at that time of being, when I got stabbed 'cause like I said after I got stabbed and I lost quite a lot of things, I wasn't the same. I still really, get depressed over that stuff still sometimes, but like first I was proper depressed, [X] will tell you that. I didn't really, I didn't really speak much like, like little things to buy and stuff like food every day I couldn't do that, I had before, I used to think of that as petty and little miscellaneous stuff that I always had money for but it's like even little things like having money for the miscellaneous stuff no more little things like that's what was starting to get to me. I've lost a lot and I didn't get any help, it just started to piss me off to be honest, but now with [X] I feel like I do things differently.

Measuring the success of this project is in part about reducing offending, but getting people to think about risk and engage in less violent offending is also important, and these small changes can be the start to more significant changes as they continue to work with the YOP team. For many young people, having someone that they could trust, who they felt

genuinely cared about them and would not let them down was *the* most salient factor that helped them make positive changes to their lives.

4.1.5 The bumpy road to change

While some young people are able to make dramatic changes to their lives in short periods of time, for other young people the road to making positive choices takes a longer time.

New Horizon do not have a time limit for how long they can work with young people, and this open-ended support is a key part of

their theory of change model. One young person who had been working with a member of the YOP team as a result of

“She didn’t stop working with me...and I don’t think I’d be here today if she hadn’t stuck by me.”
(Natasha)

her brother’s violent offending history, commented on the importance of one YOP member in supporting her over nearly a decade and the positive impact this had on her life:

Natasha: I came into contact with [X] almost eight years ago because she had worked with my brother at the time. He started getting into trouble when he was 13 and through doing a comprehensive evaluation of him also started to work with me as well. [X] always checked in with me when she came to see my brother, so he was the main focus but she’d make sure I was doing ok in school and everything was generally going ok. But when I was 13 and my brother was 16, my dad died, and my mom was out of the picture, and [X] stepped in to help – chasing up social workers, acting as an advocate, which is really nice because whether it was her job role or not that was what was needed. When my brother got into more serious crime and I got put into foster care she kept in touch and made sure I was ok. She didn’t stop working with me even after my brother went to prison, and I don’t think I’d be here today if she hadn’t stuck by me.

This open-ended approach is something that is particularly effective for clients who have often been let down by other people in their lives, or those who don’t have support networks they can count on, and can often mean that young people stay in the project for years. Not only does such a strategy reinforce trust, but it also means that if young people face problems at any point they can seek help. Observations made during the evaluation made clear that even young people who had been able to successfully move away from offending (obtaining employment or going back to education), sometimes relapsed back into offending, or faced crises where they needed support not to do so. There is no clear linear path for young people moving from ‘bad’ activities to ‘good’ activities in a straightforward way – rather, the adjustments they have to make take time, and the open-

ended model allows for a flexible approach that really works.

The New Horizon approach to building trust with young people over a long period of time means that door is always open. Even if they have made a lot of meaningful progress, small

“There is no clear linear path for young people moving from ‘bad’ activities to ‘good’ activities in a straightforward way – rather, the adjustments they have to make take time, and the open-ended model allows for a flexible approach that really works.”

things can derail that trajectory and having the YOP team as a source of support they can always come back to is both reassuring for them psychologically, but also practically. One young person I interviewed several times in the community and seemed to be doing well, ended up in prison towards the end of the evaluation. When I asked him what happened, he told me:

Denzel: I had a debt, you know, that I had to pay back. I was trying to go straight and got my [X] qualification and was doing ok. But I owed some money from back in the day and my job wasn't gonna give me the cash I needed. It had to be done.

Interviewer: What would have happened if you didn't pay it back?

Denzel: You know, I've seen my friend's sister being attacked in the street in [X] because he owed. She had never done anything, was going to school, wasn't involved in nothing and now her life is ruined, you feel me? I don't even care if they hurt me but what about my mum, or my little brothers? You gotta find a way to pay it – and that's why I'm back in here. No choice.

While many models of youth working would discourage this kind of emotional relationship, the intense vulnerability of these young people necessitates a different mode of working. The young-person centred nature of the project sets it apart from other organisations and the positive outcomes are clearly a result of this particular model of working.

4.1.6 Loneliness and social isolation

Social isolation and loneliness emerged in the data in a number of surprising ways. A number of studies suggest that social isolation and loneliness may impact health behaviours due to their impact on social support or social cues for behaviour choices (c.f. Shankar et al. 2011; Cacioppo and Hawkley 2003; House 2001), and a recent systematic review on the public health consequences of social isolation and loneliness (c.f. Leigh-Hunt et al. 2017)

suggests that some forms of offending may also be exacerbated by these factors. Little work has been done on this issue in relation to young offenders, and this is an area that deserves further attention. For young people in this study, social support was important for them being able to 'go straight'. Many young people in the project grew up in areas with high levels of social deprivation and their social networks were limited to other young people who were also engaged in offending or were gang-affiliated. Moving away from areas where they were known was key for them being able to make a new start, but this often meant moving away from family and the only friends they had ever had. The interview exchange with a young man about to be released from prison after a long sentence makes clear the challenges they face:

Aaron: How many people do you know that have been in prison?

Interviewer: Honestly, none...

Aaron: Ok, then how many of your friends that you knew from school are dead?

Interviewer: Well, a few but not many.

Aaron: I bet they didn't die on road after getting stabbed did they?

Interviewer: No. You're right. They didn't...

Aaron: So what am I gonna do when I get out? Where am I gonna go? I got all my family in [London borough] and I only got my friends from home that all do the same as I done. So where am I gonna go?

This particular young person had made amazing progress in prison and was clearly wanting and ready for a new start, but he was also aware that there were serious limitations to what he would be able to do, even with a clear desire to make changes. In this instance, knowing that he had a YOP worker there to support him when he was released, and in a sense act as a friend at a time when he knows he will have little contact with his previous social networks was something he felt would help him transition to a new life.

Another young person recognised that before he started working with the YOP team, part of the reason he was unable to make changes after coming out of prison was because he was unsupported in a new environment where he did not know many people. Living in a new area, feeling anxious and lonely in a new living environment, and not trusting new people left him vulnerable to reoffending. I spoke to him after his release from prison and his recent successes with the New Horizon team:

Carlos: Compared to where I was before, after prison I been through supported housing and I was in there for two years. It wasn't that bad but they weren't hands on and I didn't feel like my key worker knew me. I don't think she understood what made me tick – you know? Like what my main

issues was, and you're left alone to deal with your own shit and gotta find a way through. So I went back to my area and started it all up again because what other choice did I have.

Recognising the importance of social isolation and loneliness to young people wanting to make changes to their lives is a key finding and something that is relatively unexplored in academic literature. This emerged from data across the evaluation as one of the most salient issues to young people's successful movement away from offending.

4.1.7 Prison and key moments of change

Young people often highlighted their experiences in prison as a key moment where they felt they were ready to seek out support services. Participants frequently highlighted the letters they received (both initial referral letters for new clients, and letters checking in with already existing clients) as important, and the consistency with which the YOP team followed-up and engaged with young men during their prison sentence was crucially important. Participants suggested that having regular visits from the YOP team was a source of emotional support, and they expressed the importance of the YOP team delivering on their word. If YOP said they were going to visit on a certain day, they did; if the YOP team said they would follow up on something for a young person, they did; if the YOP team made a promise, they kept it. This follow through and consistency helped develop a sense of trust and respect for the YOP team, a difficult thing to achieve with high-risk young offenders. It meant then that when young men were released from prison, they had a direct point of contact that they could rely on and that they knew personally, and this helped facilitate their move back into the community. In one example, a young person interviewed first in 2016 in prison, said during a follow-up interview carried out in 2018 after he was released and back in the community:

Interviewer: OK so [X] just kind of helps direct you and obviously you've known her for a long time and she came to visit you when you were inside, how were those visits important for making you feel like...

Tariq: Yeah, 100% at first, I dunno if she told you but, at first when she'd visit I just come in there and sat down not really spoke to her, thought, 'oh it's just another woman' 'cause I've had plenty of women that have spoke to me in the past, just that, they come they go, but obviously [X] has been there for over the last 2 and a half years and helped me with a lot of things and getting me paperwork. Even little things like driving licence or theory test, anything that can help me with my life she's tried to help me.

Interviewer: So is that, is [X] different from other people you've worked with? Because you told me last time we met that you grew up in care so obviously you had social workers and other people in your life.

Tariq: I don't know I think it's just the relationship we got, I dunno if it could be like that with anyone else, she's just a nice person, she just gets along with a lot of young people and obviously she cares for them herself and she does everything she can to help their lives.

Interviewer: So you feel like she really cares? And that's different to other people you've met?

Tariq: Yeah it comes across when she does it, when she talks to you like and when she does all these things, and comes and helps you she cares.

“The continuity of working with the same people from prison and then into the community is important here – as young people felt they were supported all through their journey”

For the young people in prison, having contact with someone who was consistently in contact (via letter writing and visits), gave them the support they

need to make positive changes after they leave prison. It also meant that appropriate and relevant job or training opportunities could be organised while they were still in prison (via the prison education and training service), or were ready for young people as soon as they left. This created a sense of stability for young men, and gave them a sense of hope while they were incarcerated. The continuity of working with the same people from prison and then into the community is important here – as young people felt they were supported all through their journey and could come out of prison knowing there was someone who genuinely cared about their future and would work with them to make steps towards a new way of life.

4.2 Stakeholder Feedback

Qualitative interviews were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil servants, statutory service staff across London, other third sector organisations that work with young people, and New Horizon staff.

- Civil servants including probation services, prison and youth offending institution staff, and Job Centre Plus staff;
- Borough level statutory service staff, with a particular focus on staff from of London boroughs with a high number of young people involved in serious youth offending, including social workers, housing workers, gang workers, and other social care staff;
- Third sector workers from a range of organisations that work with vulnerable young people, young offenders, and young people known to be gang affiliated;
- Staff from across New Horizon including management, staff from the youth outreach project, and a wide range of staff that work with young people via the drop-in.

The areas below cover themes that emerged from the interviews as being salient to current policy level debates, but also provide useful accounts of how effective the YOP team are at engaging young people and reducing risky behaviours and offending.

4.2.1. Housing

The importance of securing safe and stable accommodation has been highlighted throughout the report, arising both in conversations with young people and with the YOP team themselves. Similarly, stakeholders identified housing support as one of the key services that New Horizon were able to provide, and one that is vital to the success of interventions with young people involved in offending behaviour. As one clinical psychologist noted:

Adam: From a mental health perspective there are certain things that we all need to function, to survive, and having a safe space, a shelter is one of those basic needs. If that goes then very, very quickly everything else around that young person can tumble along with it, and a lot of the people we work with may not be ready or capable of engaging... around their mental health needs until their practical needs have been supported, so housing is a really important one of those.

All stakeholders observed that finding housing, particularly in London, where space is at a premium, is a difficult and complex task. However, as one interviewee described it, New Horizon are “very clued-up with the system and how it works”. Not only that, but there was a perception that they were able to offer a bespoke and specialised service, even in the face of the scarcity of accommodation available. Luke, a third sector gang worker, noted that:

Luke: They [New Horizon] *care* about placing that young person in the *right* environment, and then following through with necessary support afterwards... They don't just abandon that young person afterwards, they give [them] that wraparound service.

All stakeholder interviewees stressed how key it often is for young people's safety to be securely housed away from the location(s) they had previously lived in, due to conflicts they had experienced in their local area and, occasionally, in their own homes. As one interviewee from a third sector housing organisation noted:

Alexis: I mean a lot of the New Horizon kids come from [a London location] and coming to [other London location] is it a chance for them to kind of have a new life. I've had a few actually, and one in particular, it's like erm, you can see the child wonder in his face, because it's like he gets to breathe for the first time without having to put on this mask of being a gangster. He can be himself.

4.2.2 Building trust

Much like the young people interviewed, all stakeholders described the YOP team's ability to gain the trust of the client group as a key element of its success. Stakeholders noted how the young people the team engaged with presented a real challenge as “most of these young people have lost trust in professionals, and, to go further than that, they've lost trust in others, in adults, in their lives...” (Adam, clinical psychologist). However:

Adam: So New Horizon make the relationship key and create a strong, consistent, and bounded attachment that allows for trust to grow between the professional and the young person. And then from there, change becomes more realistic. So good outcomes can range from practical things like housing, getting them to engage with other services, sign up with their GP, attend probation meetings, very discrete things like that, but also... success can be categorised by what we notice in the young person, if they're more able to have difficult conversations, more able to

recognise and regulate their emotions, recognise the emotions of others, and access and seek support, use what's on offer – that's a big outcome.

Many stakeholders believed that a core element of establishing this trust is the YOP team's down-to-earth approach and relatability. Young people feel safe opening up to the team about issues they would not necessarily feel comfortable discussing with other authority figures in their lives. One public sector gang worker noted:

Carolyn: [The YOP workers are] very good at gaining trust and building a relationship that allows the young person to feel quite settled and able to talk about things... Something like smoking cannabis might be something that's a really important thing to have a discussion with a young person about, in terms of what they're using, how much they're smoking ... but that kind of conversation can be really blocked if the young person thinks they're going to get in trouble for mentioning it... There's trust in New Horizon as a youth centre, and there's trust in the [YOP] project.

"the patience, the hard work that [the YOP team] put in, just keeping these young people engaged is a test in itself... They're not turning up to see their probation officer, but they are turning up to see New Horizon [staff]" (Joe, gang exit worker)

Often this relatability was seen as stemming from the fact that New Horizon operates outside of the 'system'. Unlike probation or social services, the YOP workers are not viewed by the

young people as being part of the state or as being 'authority' type figures with the ability to punish and/or control. Indeed, the fact that young people are not *required* to attend makes the high levels of engagement with young people who are deeply entrenched in serious offending even more remarkable. One probation worker noted that:

Yvonne: It's good for young people to move away from probation... Young engage with probation and social services because they *have* to, New Horizon is away from all of that... it's something you do for *you!*

Another third sector worker from a London-wide gang exit project agreed:

Joe: I mean some of these young boys were entrenched in that sort of... 'young gang kid behaviour', and it's a bit hard for them to let go of that way of behaving. But when they see... when someone explains to them that they need to get on board or these things that are happening to [them] are going to get worse [which New Horizon is able to do]... then they start to engage. I mean, the patience, the hard work that [the YOP team] put in, just keeping these young people engaged is a test in itself... They're not turning up to see their probation officer, but they are turning up to see New Horizon [staff], and I think that speaks for itself.

There was a sense from the interviewees that building trust and rapport with the sort of young people that the YOP team work with is often an almost impossible task – and that much of the support young people receive from state or third sector agencies is either cold and indifferent, or too controlling and coercive. However, the YOP team are seen as offering a kind of ‘Goldilocks’ support that is ‘just right’, and closely aligned to the client group’s needs. As a participant in probation explains:

Yvonne: [The YOP team have] got a good approach, they give just enough support, but they don’t say ‘if you don’t come in you’re going to get a warning’ or ‘if you stop coming to us we’re going to close the case’... They really gear it to the person’s specific needs, instead of saying ‘we’re just going to do this and that’s that’, which unfortunately a lot of charities do... [As a result the young people] like them [the New Horizon team]... They feel like they’re on a level... They’re not coming with some unrealistic expectation of them, they’re not pushy... [The young people] like the balance, they don’t want to be told what to do, but they do need the advice, the support – but with a say in what’s going on.

The YOP team were therefore seen as being in a position where young people were actually likely to use them, as evidenced in an observation from a clinical psychologist working with the team:

Adam: There’s a lot of almost peer referrals, info being passed word of mouth among young people, and the young people highlighting New Horizon as a place that other young people can go for help, and I think that’s a really powerful outcome.

4.2.3 The bumpy road to change

Again, much as in the interviews with young people, stakeholders praised YOP workers for acknowledging that the process of change for young people is often not a quick or smooth one, and for sticking with clients in situations where other organisations would give up. As one probation worker notes:

Yvonne: A lot of agencies pull out really quickly when someone gets a prison sentence, and [the young person] feel[s] totally abandoned... [The YOP team] don’t do that.

In a way, this is seen as being related to both the fact that New Horizon can operate outside some of the constraints of state agencies, and the practical, compassionate, and down-to-

earth approach taken by individual YOP workers. One participant who works for a local authority commented at length about this:

Cheryl: This client group are very guarded, and very expectant of being let down, so a big challenge is working with that and rolling with the resistance that is presented. Whereas other services may completely disengage when a young person has not attended a certain amount of appointments, New Horizon tries to understand that in a more compassionate way... It might not be the right time for the young person, and that's fine, but it might also be that something else is happening [in their life that needs addressing]. Whereas other statutory services may have more pressure to get people off their waiting list and stop working with disengaged service users, it's really fallen to services like New Horizon to behave in a different way, and I guess that's another huge difficulty, working this way in a system which doesn't really operate in that kind of flexible long term way.

4.2.4 Quality of staff

All stakeholders we spoke with were effusive in their praise of individual members of the YOP team they had had contact with. Staff were described by stakeholders invariably as professional and reliable, with some noting:

Luke: They go above and beyond... doing extra hours, showing a real desire to make change, or enable [young people] to make change.

Joe: They are really professional and caring... It's well-led, from the top going down, and really a godsend... a really, really good service.

Susan: Incredibly passionate about helping their clients, and really great at communicating with us to make sure we work together to help these kids.

4.3 Key issues for staff

4.3.1 Managing trauma and staff mental health

The mental health of the YOP team themselves was also key, as they often witnessed violent scenes. Literature that explores the impacts of vicarious trauma for those working with particularly vulnerable client groups (c.f. Bell et al. 2003; Regeher and Cadell, 1999; and Catherall 1995) suggests that organisations have a key role to play in supporting staff and ensuring that those working with traumatised populations receive appropriate support. On a number of occasions staff were called to the hospital after a client had been stabbed and were asked to make decisions about care if there was no obvious next of kin to do this. In one particularly harrowing incident, one of the team was called to respond to a crisis situation as a young man in a severe state of distress had smashed his head against a brick wall and was bleeding profusely. This team member was covered in blood and terrified that the young person was dying. The ambulance came quickly and the client was taken to hospital where he made a full recovery, but the trauma from the incident and the thought that this young person was literally dying in front of her, could be damaging if not dealt with appropriately.

“organisations have a key role to play in supporting staff and ensuring that those working with traumatised populations receive appropriate support.”

As a result of interim recommendations, the YOP team regularly see a specially-trained clinical

psychologist to help deal with traumatic situations like this, as well as working on improving communication within the team. These sessions are also a place to seek support and advice about difficult clients. This change has improved the communication between the team members, and in many instances helped staff deal more effectively with challenging situations or difficult clients. Working hours were mentioned as being more manageable after the introduction of clinical supervisions, and weekly team meetings are now held to allow for better communication across the team about high-risk clients and to ensure a joined-up approach to working effectively with young people. The allocation of specific tasks to particular members across the team has improved the smooth running of the YOP project, and safe working practices are now regularly discussed.

The values and ethos of organisations impact how workers understand their role, and issues such as managing work load, creating safe spaces to discuss specific events or experiences in

debrief settings, and ensuring that working practices keep people safe are fundamentally important to ensuring that workers can manage the difficult elements of their jobs. There is now a clear process for moving clients on if they are not engaging or are considered to be engaging in significantly risky activities – something that was highlighted in the interim report as an area of concern. While clients are able to return or reach out if they want to re-engage with the service, it means that cases can be closed even for short periods which allows YOP to focus on the needs of clients who need the most help at that time.

Risk assessment is another key issue to be considered when working with high-risk young offenders. Case and Haines (2013) argue that using blunt risk assessment tools are often overly deterministic and do not take a holistic view of all that factors that might impact 'risk'. As such, the YOP team have now developed a sophisticated risk assessment tool to use with their client group, and in line with suggestions from Case (2007) move beyond reductive quantitative measures to include a wider range of material to help better understand the contextual nature of 'risk' for the team and their client group. The recent commissioning of a safeguarding review in 2018 and the implementation of an action plan have also had positive impacts on the organisation as a whole in terms of putting the safety of the team and of the young people first. The safeguarding review has helped the YOP team further reflect on and refine safe working practices (e.g. team working where possible; using mobile technology to check-in after appointments in the community, etc.).

Recent management changes have also resulted in discussions about the future direction of New Horizon, with the appointment of a new director in 2018. These changes have enabled organisational conversations about creating a coherent and shared vision for New Horizon – particularly in relation to developing key principles that guide the work they do. There have been a number of Away Days for all New Horizon staff in the past year (2018), as well as Away Days for YOP that have sought to encourage better communication and to share strategic goals with all staff. Research from Choi (2011) on the organisational impacts on secondary traumatic distress found that if workers received more support from colleagues/management and had more information about the strategic aims of the organisation, workers had lower levels of secondary traumatic stress.

Barford and Whelton (2010) measured burnout in a group of 94 child and youth care workers across eight agencies in Canada. Burnout was conceptualised as emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and a lack of a sense of personal accomplishment. The findings show that the three dimensions of burnout were predicted by a combination of work environment, personality and social support. The organisational practices that

communicate goals and values and encourage open communication and dialogue ultimately create an environment where workers are safe – both physically and psychologically. This also helps to prevent burn-out and ensures that workers are capable of dealing with the challenges posed by such a vulnerable client group; equally, it helps to make sure that young people have access to people they trust who are able to work with them because they have adequate help and support to do so. New Horizon have created an organisational culture that helps to facilitate this and, as such, allows for the key outcomes of the project to be met.

4.3.2 Facilitating change: developing a robust theory of change model

It is also critical that the YOP team are not ‘mentors’ – they have received extensive training on how to work with these clients and have a clear code of best practice that ensures young people are supported properly. There are a wide range of organisations that work with high-risk young offenders, using different modules to try to facilitate change. While mentoring is often seen as a useful approach to engaging young people (Quinn and Shera 2009), Hucklesby and Wincup (2014) present findings from three empirical criminal justice projects to challenge the effectiveness of mentoring with defendants and offenders. The authors contest the claims of success in relation to mentoring and argue that it is a poorly defined concept with weak theoretical foundations; claims of success are grounded in limited evidence; the punitive and coercive environment of the criminal justice system conflicts with the principles and values of mentoring.

Guidelines from the Ministry of Justice (2011) around reducing reoffending rates for young

*“New Horizon do an amazing job at seeing young people *as people* – not as criminals or offenders.”*

people maintain that effective programmes need to be underpinned by a strong theory of change that addresses offender needs in a holistic and sequenced manner. The model of change at New Horizon is young-person focused, and recognises that there are a wide range of issues that may impact on young people’s ability to make positive changes. They work closely with prisons and probation to ensure young people can make an easy transition back into the community; they engage with gang teams and other statutory agencies across London to make sure they can help young people in the most appropriate way. They adhere to a holistic and sequenced model that allows for meaningful multi-agency working to be deployed to effectively reduce offending behaviours for young people.

4.3.3 Managing limited resources

The ethnographic element of the project, and its pan-London remit, made clear that YOP staff often travel across London and beyond to meet with clients. YOP workers also travel to prisons in London and outside London as well (in one case travelling as far as Nottingham to see a young person in prison). Travelling is both financially and temporally difficult when there are only a few staff working with very large caseloads. The new risk assessment tool that was put into place in 2019 may help identify clients who can be seen at the general drop-in sessions (possible with low-risk clients), thereby ensuring time spent travelling is limited to particular clients who may have safety issues and cannot attend the centre (e.g. clients with criminal behaviour orders who are not allowed to travel to particular boroughs, or young people with a gang history that makes it unsafe for them to be in the local area).

Time is at a premium for the YOP team – in part because of the extensive travelling and the heavy caseloads, but also because the team need to fill in paperwork related to each client they see. Following the completion of data collection, YOP were given mobile technology that allows them to enter important information about clients to the database and relevant systems while they are out in the field. Having portable electronic devices should help ease the amount of time the team need to spend entering data while behind a desk, and it may be worthwhile exploring the possibility of updating the existing software to something more user friendly and adaptable. Equally, it may be useful to consider what age group is most at risk and focus attention on a specific group to help ensure resources are targeted at the most in-need young people.

5. Summary and Discussion

The data presented across this report makes clear the complex needs of the young people in YOP. All young people who participated in the study expressed high levels of satisfaction with the services offered, and indicated that working with the project had a positive impact on their offending behaviour. Sometimes these were small achievements (e.g. a slight reduction in very violent offending), while for others impressive changes were evidenced (e.g. disengaging completely from violent crime and using training and education to create a new future). Working with clients over long periods of time (without any sense that clients should be moved on at a specific point) is extremely effective when working with vulnerable, high-risk clients. Professionals in the statutory and voluntary sector were very positive about their work with New Horizon, and the increasing number of referrals from across London is an indicator of the efficacy of the YOP project.

“stakeholders praised YOP workers for acknowledging that the process of change for young people is often not a quick or smooth one, and for sticking with clients in situations where other organisations would give up.”

Part of the reason YOP get so many referrals is because their work is recognised across London as exemplary. Interviews with stakeholders evidenced the value ascribed to the work being carried out by YOP and every interview revealed that statutory and voluntary sector professionals who work with YOP can see meaningful differences for the young people in the project. It should be noted that while YOP takes on referral cases from a wide range of organisations, in many cases they are taking on clients without remuneration. While much has been done since the interim report to address unmanageable workloads, the YOP team are still stretched. This is not sustainable and is particularly problematic when New Horizon are fulfilling a role that should be done by a statutory service.

New Horizon and the YOP project are well placed to deliver services for their client group and manage to make real, meaningful changes to the young people they work with. Without the excellent support from the YOP workers, many of the young people in the study would be in prison or dead. However, it is hard to erase years of trauma and expect this vulnerable group of people to be easily or quickly transformed into what society would see as the ‘ideal citizen’. Indeed, failing to acknowledge how vulnerable these young people are and the inability to seeing them as victims is also part of the problem. New Horizon do an amazing job at seeing young people *as people* – not criminals or offenders. They learn about their lives and their histories and find ways of building trust. Working with them for longer periods of time, and offering a flexible approach allow young people space to make changes

when-and-as they are ready, giving them real support to help even when they are struggling most. It is true

“failing to acknowledge how vulnerable these young people are and the inability to seeing them as victims is also part of the problem.”

that not all young people can be reached, and the very sad reality is that some of the young people who work with YOP may be killed, or else end up serving long sentences for violent offences. The results of the evaluation suggest, though, that even the most entrenched young people are willing to engage with New Horizon, and the vast majority end up modifying their behaviours. Even the small changes are remarkable and achieved largely as a result of the excellent services offered by YOP.

6. Recommendations

While many of the recommendations from the interim report have been taken up and are already having positive impacts on service delivery, there are a number of wider recommendations that should be considered.

- 1. Mental health** continues to be a key issue facing young people with offending histories, and ensuring that mental health professionals are funded to work with the team and young people in a range of settings is key for ensuring that New Horizon can provide the most appropriate support and guidance. Embedding mental health professionals in the team will undoubtedly help the YOP team work with high-risk clients more effectively. It is important, however, to consider the impact new additions to the YOP team, specifically the clinical psychologist and the counsellor, and include a mechanism for systematically evaluating the impact on YOP clients.
 - 2. Long-term relationships with young people** is one of the strengths of the project, and ensures that young people who might disengage from the project can come back at any time without having to tell their stories all over again. This is a critical element to the success of the project, and something that should be considered in the sector more widely.
 - 3. Effective risk assessment** is fundamentally important for keeping young people and staff safe – continuing the development of a specific risk assessment tool that understands ‘risk’ from multiple perspectives and takes a holistic view is critical here, and once the tool has been refined and evaluated, sharing the model across the sector would help establish New Horizon as a leader in this area. Current tools are often reductive or fail to understand risk as a complex and dynamic concept, so sharing best practice around the process of developing and implementing a risk assessment tool that is fit for purpose for this client group would be of benefit to the wider sector.
 - 4. Homelessness and housing** emerged as being some of the most pressing issues for ensuring that young people can reduce offending and keep them safe. While the YOP team do an excellent job with this already, it is important to keep this as a high priority on the agenda and continue to find ways to address what is clearly a crisis situation. Ensuring that reciprocal arrangements are in place across London is an important way to start addressing this issue, but third sector organisations need sustainable funding for vulnerable and at-risk young people so that they can be housed quickly and in an area that keeps them safe.
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- 6. Social isolation and loneliness** are also key issues for young people who are trying to make positive changes and move away from offending activities. Working with clients over a long period of time and moving away from the idea that 'professional' boundaries should exclude meaningful relationships with young people helps address this key issue. As such, considering how this particular mode of working fits into the organisational theory of change model is important and could be shared as a model of best practice across the sector. However, more focus on loneliness and its impact on reoffending needs to continue to be considered across the sector.
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7. Best Practice Guidelines for the Sector

Based on the findings from the project and in the context of the wider literature on working with young people, a number of best practice guidelines have been identified for consideration:

1. While many youth organisations take the view that mentoring is the best route for giving young people, especially young men, a (male) role model. In many cases this approach may prove effective, but the findings here suggest that having staff that are trained and properly supported to work with young people is critical. Gender did not emerge as salient for young people, and they were clear that they wanted to work with people who could work efficiently to help them with jobs, training, housing, and other key issues. As such, focusing on training staff and volunteers to ensure they have the knowledge and ability to assist young people is of the utmost importance, and should be a more pressing consideration when developing a theory of change model.
2. Developing a risk assessment tool that was flexible and met the needs of high-risk young people while also keeping staff safe was an important element of the evaluation. Ensuring that risk assessments are flexible enough to understand risk as dynamic and changing is important – and in the case of New Horizon a specially designed risk tool was created to give a 360-degree view of risk. The positive impact of this is already being realised with YOP, and this is something the wider sector should consider in their own programmes.
3. Making sure that data about clients can be easily and securely recorded by frontline staff is critically important. Software and hardware need to be fit for purpose to ensure that information about clients can be shared amongst the team and the wider organisation. Accurate data is important for managing and assessing risk, and sharing information across teams helps inform action plans for helping young people.
4. As the public sector has responded to austerity measures, and in many cases have withdrawn services for the most vulnerable, the third sector has stepped in to ensure that young people have the support they need to make positive changes. Workloads for many frontline staff have increased, and managing large caseloads with limited resources was one of the issues facing the YOP team and New Horizon. Changes were made after feedback from interim findings were reported, and the situation is significantly better, and staff were better able to cope with the demands from clients. Making sure that workloads are managed should be obvious, but in some cases the most dedicated frontline staff do not always realise how much they are taking on, or the impact this might have. Proactive management strategies that regularly check work/life balance is best practice and should be an important part of staff appraisals.

5. The YOP team, like many people working at the frontline with vulnerable groups, take on an enormous amount of trauma through their work. The physical and emotional toll that this work requires demands not only that workloads are effectively managed, but that staff are able to seek help from qualified professionals when needed. Anyone working with gang-affiliated young people and hearing their stories of abuse and violence should have regular access to a clinical psychologist who can help them process the trauma.
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