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CARTER'S STORY



Stability as a precondition for progress

Youth Justice Work at New Horizon Youth Centre

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NEW HORIZON YOUTH CENTRE

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Introduction

The Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre works across London with young people aged 16–25 who have involvement in the criminal justice system and are experiencing housing instability. This report explores the role of safe and stable housing as a foundational condition that allows young people to begin rebuilding their lives - away from cycles of offending and violence.

Drawing on learning from a wider evaluation of youth justice practice at New Horizon Youth Centre, it examines how young people experience the transition from instability to relative stability, and how this shift can affect their emotional wellbeing, engagement with support, and ability to move forward with work, education or other goals.

Carter's story is a composite case study, co-developed with young people and practitioners. It draws on recurring themes from the experiences of young people involved in the evaluation. Many had histories shaped by overlapping challenges, including care experience, exposure to violence, unstable housing, and unmet mental health or neurodivergent needs.

The case includes both a young person's narrative and a corresponding practitioner perspective, offering insight into how this stage is experienced and navigated from both sides.

Carter's perspective shows how stable housing can create the conditions for recovery, reflection and forward planning, while also bringing new emotional challenges as young people begin to process past experiences and adjust to change.

The practitioner perspective shows what it takes to support young people during this phase in practice, including maintaining engagement, responding to emerging needs, and working within systems that can still constrain progress even after stability has been achieved.

Bringing these perspectives together allows us to see both how these experiences are lived and how they are responded to in practice. The key themes across both are explored in the sections that follow.

Elements from several real experiences have been brought together within each account. Identifying details have been altered to protect anonymity, but care has been taken to preserve what those experiences felt like and the circumstances surrounding them. Young people's language has been retained where appropriate.

Text in bold reflects the direct words of young people, drawn from evaluation interviews.



Carter's story

Carter's perspective

When I came out [of prison], I went back to my Nan's.

That was the address on my release papers. It was the place I knew best. When I was a kid ***I was always at my Nan's house****, so going back there felt like landing somewhere solid. After everything, I thought maybe I could breathe a bit.*

For a while, things were alright. I was still on edge, in defensive mode. Watching where I went, who was about. Even being out of prison, I didn't feel free. But at my Nan's it was calm. I knew where I was.

Then she was gone.

It happened not long after I got out. One minute she was there, next she wasn't. I didn't really get time to take it in. I lost her, and then I lost where I was staying. Everything just went.

I was just bouncing around after that. Friends' sofas, family when they'd have me. A few nights here, a week there. I kept it short. Often, the places I had to stay were with people who were part of that life, so it was hard not to get mixed up in all that madness. But I didn't really have much choice. I needed to eat, and places to stay, so I felt forced to make certain decisions I didn't really want to.

> ***When someone else is paying the rent they have a position of power. They can tell you what to do. In a way you just have no freedom.*** *- Carter*

I didn't want to be holding a knife or nothing, *but because I had to* ***stay in that area I would have no other choice, I would feel my paranoia eating me up if I didn't have it with me.***

That was when I met Pete. ***I was just bare paranoid*** *and basically homeless, but he said he could help. He started* ***paying for my hotels, so I wasn't sleeping on the streets*** *and was* ***away from the area****. He also spoke to my probation officer and helped me understand what I was and wasn't meant to be doing. He explained things slowly, sometimes more than once, because my head just wasn't clear back then. He kept checking in, making sure I didn't disappear. I guess that's what made him different – he didn't rush me.*



It's bare expensive living in hotels. Pete helped me out with ***vouchers and stuff, just to make sure I could go through the day. Without him, I'm not gonna lie, I think I would've starved.*** *I can't remember how long I was living in hotels, but one day someone I knew from before turned up outside and put knives on my neck, threatening me. I told Pete and then a few days later, he said housing had found somewhere for me.*

It was way outside of London, so for the first time, I actually felt like I could chill. I could walk down the street without thinking someone would recognise me. I didn't need to carry anything with me. I've got my own front door, ***my own keys. No one can get in****. I didn't have to worry about where I'd be the next night or who might be around the corner.* ***I can walk out any time of day, go out in my slippers.*** *I knew that, but some part of me was still jumpy, looking over my shoulder.*

It's like I'm at home, I'm chilling, but that's when it all starts kicking in.

> ***Obviously having my own place had a positive effect on my mental health but at the same time, because I've just come out of that lifestyle, it had just made me really tired. Imagine running a marathon, and then you go to relax. That's when your body's hurting, it's like you can't get up..*** *- Carter*

I started not showing up to things. Talking less. Not because I didn't want to, but because I didn't know what to say. People were asking me all these questions, but it was just all getting in my head. I didn't know what to do or what people wanted so I went quiet.

Pete noticed before anyone else did. He ***didn't judge*** *or make me feel like I should be grateful. He explained that sometimes feeling worse is what happens when things finally slow down. That helped. Sometimes we didn't even talk about anything much, he just sat with me or we played games.*

Pete suggested I get some help at the centre for my mental health, see a therapist. I had an idea about what it would be like, but I was totally wrong. She was ***very patient with me if I needed to take a break or have a little smoke. Therapy helped me be able to understand my feelings and myself and that it's okay to feel certain ways and there's ways around it. Through therapy, they even showed me I had PTSD. So I'm just thinking I'm paranoid,*** *but now I understand it's because of what I've been through - it just* ***makes your brain feel a type of way.***

After a while, something clicked and I started thinking about moving forward again.

I wanted to work*, do something legit. Earn my own money without having to worry the police might get involved. Before I met Pete, I never thought I would be able to work, but Pete* ***gave me the confidence and made me feel like I could be part of the normal world.***

*Pete managed to find me a job at a local cycle shop. Before I was inside, I used to love cycling, so I love being around bikes all day. And I really like the people there. My boss is great. He's been through some sh*t himself, so it feels like he gets it. We've had some good chats – he's cool, man.*

What I was doing before, money would go through one hand to the other, but the next thing you know, you're nicked. *Now that I work,* ***I value my money more. I've worked for this, this many shifts, this many hours. Freedom is priceless.***



Even so, I don't make much money, so I want to work more hours. But I can't work more hours because if I do my benefits will drop and I won't be able to pay rent. It's complicated and I don't understand it all, but I do know I'm stuck. It makes me mad that it's designed like that, surely it would be better for people to be able to work more.

I didn't finish school, so there's not many jobs I can do. And my record gets in the way as well. I feel like every time I try to do something right, something else pushes back. It's been frustrating. I feel like I'm doing everything that's being asked of me and I'm still going nowhere.

Pete has tried to explain things to other people. That it isn't me giving up, it's me hitting a wall. He's helped me talk through that feeling of losing control again. I've realised that the reason it feels so bad is it's the same feeling I've had before, just dressed up differently.

There's been times when it felt easier to stop trying. To give up and go back to my old life. That at least made me feel like I was choosing something, even if it was dangerous and I knew it wouldn't end well. We've talked about that too and thankfully I haven't done it yet. ***I still smoke weed sometimes but I don't see that as a bad thing, I used to smoke weed every day.***

And now? Things haven't really changed. I still have my job at the cycle shop, but I can't work as much as I want. I still have somewhere to live. My goal is still ***just to have a job, have money and live a normal life. Be a normal person.*** *I've* ***been trying to make a change from my previous lifestyle and I think this year will be the year where I've completely changed, turned my life around.***

Pete's perspective

By the time Carter came to me, he'd already taken a few hits. He didn't talk about it all straight away. What I noticed first was how alert he was. Not loud or chaotic - just on edge, like he was waiting for something to go wrong.

He wasn't asking for big plans. He was asking small questions. "Can I stay here?", "What happens if…?" It was all about not messing up.

When he finally got somewhere to live, everyone felt relieved. And I was too. It was frustrating that he had to be threatened at knifepoint to be taken seriously by the council. But it seems to have got more and more like that recently – you have to be in a really bad way before anyone will do anything about it.

Having somewhere solid to stay was great, of course. But I've learned that getting a place doesn't automatically mean someone feels safe. And that was the same for Carter.

After a while in his new place, he went quieter. He started missing things. Shorter answers. Less eye contact. You can easily read that as someone drifting away. But I didn't think he was drifting - I thought he was overwhelmed.

When life has been constant crisis, slowing down can be the hardest part. That's when everything catches up with you. There were sessions where we didn't achieve anything on paper. We played a game. Sat there. I made sure he knew I was still there. Sometimes that's the work.

What people don't always see is the tightrope you're walking in those moments. You're aware how thin the margin is. One missed appointment too many, one wrong interaction in his accommodation, and it could tip. You hold that in your head while trying not to let your worry show. I was relieved when he had some sessions with

the psychologist at the centre - it seemed to really help him.

There were evenings I went home still thinking about Carter. Wondering if he was alright. Checking my phone more than I should do. You learn to live with that low-level hum of concern, but it doesn't switch off.

When he started talking about work, I could hear how important it was. It wasn't just about the money. It was about dignity, control - something that felt his. It was a shift in his mindset, a point where he decided to move further away from his old life.

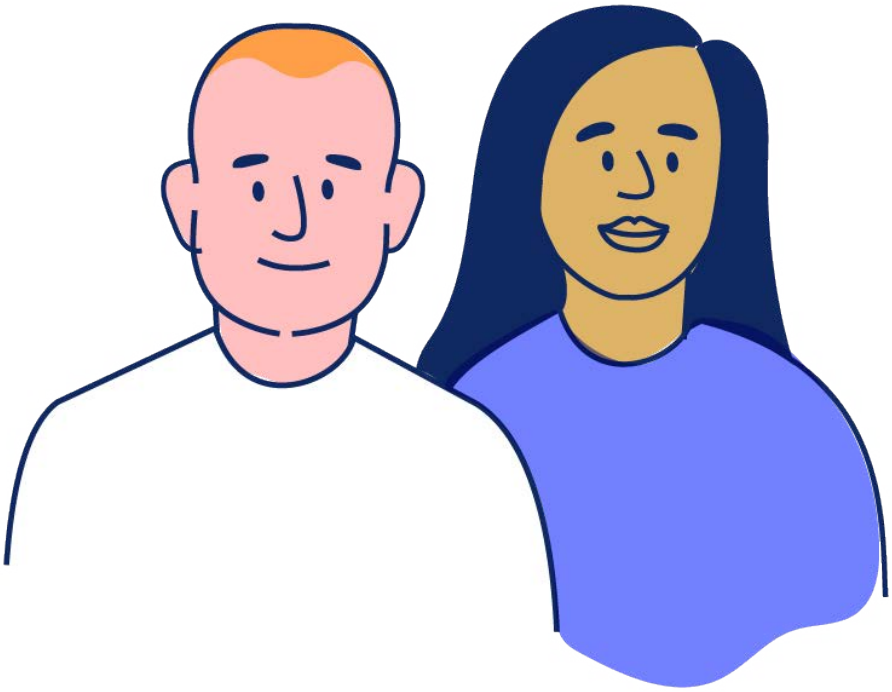
The cycle shop was a good fit because it connected to who he'd been before all this. You could see a shift in him when he talked about it. It was good to see him excited about something again.

What's been harder is the benefits situation. He wants more hours. He wants to move forward. But the way it's set up means earning more could risk his housing. That's frustrating for anyone, but for someone who already feels like control has been taken from him more than once, it hits differently.

> ***There have been moments where he's said it would be easier to go back to what he knows. Not because he thinks it's better, but because it feels clearer.*** - Pete

I guess he feels like he knows what he'd be getting, although in truth that way of life is anything but predictable. I suppose there's comfort in that unpredictability almost, if it's what you've always known.

Anyway, those are the conversations that stay with you. I wish I could say he's had some dramatic turnaround, but he hasn't. That's not what it's like. He's still navigating a lot. But he's still showing up. Still trying. Still choosing not to go backwards. And that matters more than people realise.



From Experience to Insight

Carter's story reflects several recurring themes that we observed across the wider evaluation. While presented as one narrative, it illustrates dynamics that appeared in different forms across multiple young people's experiences. The sections below describe the most consistent patterns.

Housing stability makes other forms of progress possible

As illustrated by Carter's experience, having a stable place to live can provide the foundation necessary for other positive changes to happen.

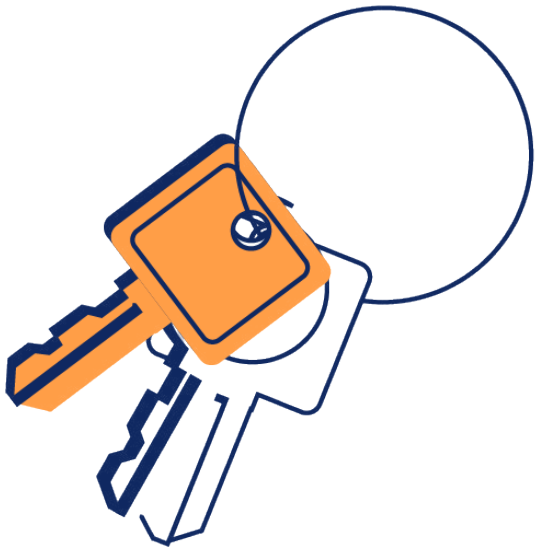
Before accessing stable accommodation, Carter was focused on immediate survival. After his release from custody and the loss of his nan, he moved between temporary places, many of them linked to people and situations he was trying to move away from. At this stage, his attention was entirely focused on getting through each day – finding somewhere to sleep and staying safe – leaving little room to think ahead or engage with support.

This same pattern appeared across the evaluation. Where young people did not have a safe and stable place to live, their focus remained on managing day-to-day crises. The uncertainty of their situation made it difficult to settle enough to think about the future or plan for progress, and even small steps forward were hard to sustain.

In Carter's case, moving into his own accommodation marked a clear shift in his story. For the first time, he had a space where he felt physically safe and didn't have to worry about who might come to the door. This allowed him to relax and go about his day without constant vigilance, bringing a sense of predictability to his daily life. With this foundation in place, Carter began to engage more consistently with support. He was able to attend therapy, reflect on his experiences, and begin making sense of how these had affected him. Over time, this created space to think about his future and to take small steps towards change.

Across the cases we reviewed, progress tended to follow a similar pattern, with positive change only becoming possible once a degree of stability had been established. This stability depended on more than simply having somewhere to live. Progress was shaped by how safe and in control young people felt, how consistent their day-to-day lives became, and whether they were able to maintain or build supportive relationships.

We found that stability, and subsequent progress, was most likely where these elements came together. Yet there were many examples of young people being placed in accommodation that did not support stability in this wider sense. Temporary arrangements made it difficult for young people to settle or plan ahead, particularly where they felt they could be moved on at short notice. Shared accommodation could increase stress or conflict, especially where young people were placed with others with experience of trauma or high levels of need. Accommodation located far from familiar places or support networks could leave young people feeling isolated and disconnected.



Our findings, as illustrated by Carter's story, show that stability is a critical starting point for change, but not guaranteed once accommodation has been found. It is only where accommodation provides the conditions needed for young people to feel safe, establish routines, and stay connected to support that progress becomes possible.

Pathways to stability differ between young people

The cases we reviewed demonstrated that there is no single route to stability. While stability depends on a combination of safety, consistency and connection, what enables these conditions to be achieved varies between young people. The same environment can be experienced very differently depending on a young person's history, needs and relationships.

Carter's experience illustrates one specific pathway. Returning to his Nan's after release from custody gave him a sense of familiarity and comfort, and later in his story, the move out of London reduced risk and helped him to feel physically safer. However, these same circumstances could be experienced very differently by another young person. Returning to a familiar area after custody could, for some, increase exposure to risk or draw them back into harmful situations. Similarly, being moved away from London may reduce immediate danger for some, but for others could feel isolating and difficult to manage, particularly where it disrupts existing relationships or support.



Across the cases, similar types of accommodation were experienced in different ways by young people. Self-contained accommodation often provided a strong sense of safety and control, but for some, it could also feel isolating or difficult to manage without the right support. Environments that appeared calm or low-risk on paper could still feel unsafe or overwhelming, depending on a young person's past experiences and ability to regulate.

These differences were closely linked to individual needs. Many young people had experienced trauma, alongside mental health needs or neurodivergence, which shaped how they responded to different settings. Factors such as noise, unpredictability, or reminders of past experiences could trigger anxiety or hypervigilance. At the same time, the presence or absence of supportive relationships influenced how manageable a placement felt, particularly where young people were adjusting to new or unfamiliar environments.

This highlights the importance of recognising that achieving stability is not simply about supporting young people into a particular type of accommodation, but about understanding how different environments are experienced by different young people, and adapting support accordingly.

When survival stops, emotions surface

When Carter moved into his own accommodation, things began to change. For the first time, he was able to relax. However, as the immediate pressure eased, he also became more withdrawn and overwhelmed.

He described this as feeling like finishing a marathon and only then noticing the pain. After a prolonged period of managing risk and staying alert, the immediate pressure lifted, but the impact of what he had been through began to surface. He started missing appointments and speaking less, not because he did not want to engage, but because he felt unsure how to respond and struggled to process everything at once.

This pattern was apparent across the cases. As young people moved out of crisis and into more stable situations, symptoms of trauma, grief, fear and exhaustion often became more visible. This could present as low mood, withdrawal, anxiety or distress, and at times may feel like, or be interpreted as, a loss of progress or disengagement.

During this phase, young people were often more sensitive to their surroundings. Environments that felt chaotic, unsafe or unsupported could quickly become overwhelming, increasing the likelihood of conflict, disengagement or breaches of licence conditions. Even in relatively stable accommodation, small pressures or changes could be difficult to manage.

Recognising this as a predictable phase in young people's journeys is critical. In Carter's case, his worker, Pete, understood that his withdrawal was not a sign that support was failing, but part of what happens when things begin to slow down. Rather than indicating a loss of progress, these responses often reflect a young person beginning to process what they had previously needed to suppress in order to cope. Where this is understood, practitioners can respond with patience and consistency, supporting young people to move through this period without losing the progress they have made.

Consistent relational support is essential during the transition to stability

As young people move from survival into stability, consistent and trusted relationships play a central role in helping them adjust and manage the challenges that follow. In Carter's case, the support he received from Pete was critical as he navigated this shift.

As his circumstances began to stabilise, Carter became more withdrawn and overwhelmed. Rather than interpreting this as disengagement, Pete recognised it as part of a wider process and adjusted his approach accordingly. At times, this meant reducing expectations and simply being present. This consistency helped Carter to remain connected, even when he found it difficult to engage.

Carter's relationship with Pete also enabled him to engage with other forms of support. With Pete as a consistent relational safety net, he was able to attend therapy and gradually navigate new commitments and relationships. This was particularly important as he adjusted to living in a new area, where he did not have established support networks.

For most young people, moving to a new area, often away from friends, family and everything familiar, would be difficult to manage alone. For this cohort, the challenge is often greater. Many have experienced trauma, disrupted relationships, and interruptions to their development through custody or prolonged instability. Mental health needs or neurodivergence can add to this, making it harder to adjust to new environments. Practitioners described the isolation that can follow relocation - the loss of familiar networks, the absence of structure, and the pull to return to known areas, often driven by a deep need for connection. Acknowledging this openly, including that it is common to feel worse before feeling better, can itself be a powerful part of support.

Consistent support during this stage is therefore essential, with many young people needing clinical support beyond what can be provided by non-clinically trained practitioners. Yet the availability of ongoing

psychological support after relocation remains inconsistent.

The Youth Justice Team is able to provide this in part through its close work with the Vanguard, an NHS and local authority pilot offering flexible psychological support to young people affected by community violence. This partnership enables access to ongoing, adaptable support as young people adjust to new environments. While the Vanguard demonstrates what is possible when clinical provision is designed around the realities of young people's lives, and can make a clear difference to whether a relocation holds, it is not available in every area. In practice, many young people are left to navigate these transitions without the level of support they need.

Stability allows identity, strengths and future plans to emerge

As Carter began to settle into his accommodation, there were early signs of a shift in how he saw himself and what he saw as possible for his future. With the immediate pressures of survival reduced, he was able to start thinking beyond day-to-day safety and consider what he wanted his life to look like.

In Carter's case, this came out in his growing interest in work. Through support from Pete, he secured a job at a cycle shop, reconnecting with something he had enjoyed before his involvement in offending. Being in this environment allowed different aspects of his identity to shine through, including his interest in cycling and his ability to build relationships with others. He spoke about valuing his earnings in a different way and beginning to see himself as part of a "normal" working world.

This pattern was reflected across the cases we reviewed. Where young people were able to find some stability and move out of survival mode, qualities that had been less visible during periods of crisis – such as humour, creativity, and care for others – became more apparent. With this came a gradual increase in motivation and self-belief.



Structural barriers can undermine stability and progress

Despite the progress Carter made, his experience also highlights the limits of what can be achieved without changes to the wider systems around him. As he began to move forward, he encountered barriers that were outside of his, and Pete's, control.

This was most evident in the interaction between work and benefits. Although he wanted to increase his hours at the cycle shop, doing so risked reducing his income overall and making it harder to cover his rent. As he described, "I feel like I'm doing everything that's being asked of me and I'm still going nowhere."

Across the cases we reviewed, young people encountered similar barriers, limiting their ability to move forward even when they were motivated to do so. Access to financial support, such as rent deposit schemes or grants, was often limited, making it difficult to secure more suitable accommodation or take next steps.

At the same time, access to specialist services, including mental health or psychiatric support, could be restricted or subject to long waiting times. Moving into work could also be challenging, with criminal records limiting the roles available and reducing opportunities to progress.

These pressures could lead to frustration and a sense of being stuck. Even where progress had been made, repeatedly encountering barriers could make it feel as though moving forward was a constant uphill battle. Over time, this could affect motivation and make it harder for young people to stay engaged with support, in some cases increasing the risk of returning to unsafe environments or previous patterns of behaviour.

Much of this sits outside the control of both young people and practitioners. While practitioners can advocate, maintain relationships and support young people to navigate these challenges, the key decisions shaping housing, income and opportunity are often made elsewhere. This can leave young people feeling stuck despite their efforts, and practitioners working to support progress within systems they cannot change.



The Youth Justice Team Practice Model

Across the evaluation, a consistent pattern emerged in how Youth Justice Team practitioners at New Horizon Youth Centre work. The findings show that the team has developed a model of practice that supports positive change for young people, even within the challenging contexts described. This model is set out in Figure 1 and comprises six interconnected functions that together describe the team's work with young people.

Figure 1: The role of the Youth Justice Team



The following section applies this model to the context of our case study, drawing on Carter's account and Pete's reflections to illustrate how these functions operate in practice as practitioners support young people to establish and sustain stability once accommodation has been secured.

Dynamic risk management and safety planning

Risk management within the Youth Justice Team is not confined to formal reviews or specific stages in a young person's journey. Practitioners described it as something they are thinking about constantly, weighing up different factors and adjusting their understanding of a situation as new information comes in. Rather than relying on a single assessment completed at one moment in time, they spoke about continually revisiting what might place a young person at risk and what might help keep them safe.

In Carter's case, this involved Pete paying close attention to how he experienced his living environment once he was housed. As Carter began to settle, the nature of the risk he was facing shifted. Rather than immediate physical danger, concerns related more to how he was coping, how isolated he felt, and how he was managing the transition into a new way of life. Staying alert to this, and supporting Carter to manage new risks as they emerged, was a critical part of Pete's role.

Practitioners described working to keep young people safe as involving ongoing adjustment. Changes in accommodation, shifts in relationships, or fluctuations in a young person's emotional state can quickly alter how a situation needs to be understood. This requires regularly revisiting plans, drawing on information from different sources, and adapting responses as circumstances evolve.

Another key aspect of the role involves communicating risk to other agencies. Many of those involved in formal decision-making do not have ongoing relationships with the young people concerned. Practitioners described the need to explain how different forms of risk interact, ensuring that decisions take account of emotional and relational factors as well as physical safety.

Across the cases we reviewed, this work involved careful judgement about competing risks. In many situations, there is no single "safe" option, but a need to weigh different forms of risk against one another and decide what is most immediate or most manageable. This requires practitioners to stay close to what is happening in young people's lives and to revisit decisions as circumstances change.

Carter's experience highlights how quickly conditions can shift, even once stability has begun to emerge. Supporting young people safely therefore involves ongoing attention, flexibility and a willingness to adjust plans as new risks and pressures arise.



Managing pressures created elsewhere

Whilst youth justice practitioners can influence some decisions at a system level, many of the pressures shaping Carter's situation remained outside the team's direct control. Factors such as the availability and suitability of accommodation, financial pressures linked to benefits, and limited options for moving forward had a significant bearing on Carter's journey.

As Carter began to stabilise, these pressures became more visible. Although he had made substantial progress, the systems around him did not always support the next steps he wanted to take. In this context, Pete's role was not only to support Carter's progress, but to help him navigate and manage the constraints he was facing. This involved talking through the practical implications of decisions, helping Carter weigh up his options, and supporting him to find ways of maintaining stability within the limits of the system.

Practitioners described this as a consistent feature of their work. While they may advocate for changes – whether in relation to accommodation, financial support or access to services – there are limits to what can be influenced directly. Much of the role therefore involves supporting young people to live within systems that are often fragmented, slow to respond, and not always aligned with their needs.

An important part of this work involves recognising when these pressures are beginning to affect a young person's motivation or sense of progress. In Carter's case, feelings of frustration and being "stuck" could easily have led to disengagement. Pete's role involved staying close to this, acknowledging the constraints without reinforcing a sense of hopelessness, and helping Carter to sustain progress despite the barriers he was facing.



Maintaining continuity across transitions

Moving into accommodation marked a significant shift in Carter's circumstances. It changed the challenges he was facing, but didn't remove them. As he adjusted to a new environment, new routines, and a different pace of life, the nature of the support he needed evolved.

During this stage of Carter's journey, Pete's role involved actively supporting him to adjust to the changes around him. As he became more withdrawn and overwhelmed, Pete adapted his approach - reducing his expectations and helping him re-engage at a pace he could manage. This helped prevent a loss of momentum at a point where things could easily have begun to unravel.

Gradually, Pete supported Carter to navigate the practical realities of living more independently. This included helping him manage appointments, engage with therapy, and begin establishing routines. As Carter adjusted to living in a new area, without established support networks, this support helped him manage changes that might otherwise have felt overwhelming.

Practitioners described this 'resettlement' as a distinct phase of work. Moving into accommodation is often treated as an end point within systems, but in practice it marks the beginning of a transition period for young people, during which they often continue

to need significant support. Without this, young people can struggle to manage the emotional and practical demands of change, particularly where they are already dealing with the effects of trauma, disrupted relationships, and, frequently, neurodevelopmental challenges.

Part of what made Pete's support different at this stage was the absence of pressure Carter felt from him. While much of the statutory system is structured around compliance, with expectations, conditions and consequences attached, the support offered by the Youth Justice Team is not conditional or based on enforced engagement. Instead, it relies on building trust and maintaining connection over time. In Carter's case, Pete's consistent, non-judgemental presence helped create the conditions he needed to stay engaged and begin to move forward.

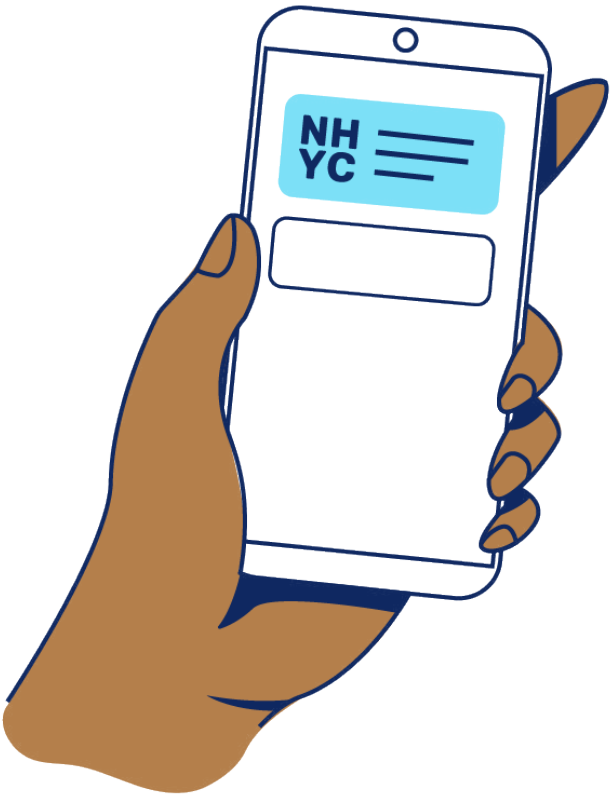
Supporting young people to navigate complex systems

As Carter began to stabilise, he came into contact with a wider range of services and systems that were intended to support his progress, including the benefit system, healthcare and employment agencies. Each system had its own processes and expectations, which could be difficult to understand and manage, particularly alongside the emotional challenges he was already facing.

Pete supported Carter to navigate these systems in a way that felt manageable. This involved helping him understand what support was available, what was being asked of him, and what steps he needed to take to move forward. By explaining processes clearly and breaking things down into manageable steps, Pete helped reduce the risk of Carter becoming overwhelmed or disengaging.

Alongside this, Pete played a role in coordinating communication between services. This included following up on referrals, providing information that was requested, and ensuring that different agencies had an accurate understanding of Carter's situation. Where issues arose - such as delays or services not meeting their responsibilities - Pete worked hard to address these, helping to keep things moving.

Practitioners described supporting young people to navigate the systems around them as a consistent feature of their role. These systems are often fragmented, with services operating in isolation and requiring young people to manage complex processes with limited support. Without someone actively helping them through these systems, young people can struggle to access what they are entitled to or disengage when processes become too difficult to manage.



Embedding lived context in decision-making

A key part of the youth justice practitioner's role is ensuring that decisions take account of the young person's lived context. Practitioners often described this as "reframing" – helping others understand behaviour and circumstances in light of the young person's history, relationships and developmental needs, and ensuring that decisions about risk and support reflect that fuller picture.

Systems such as housing, benefits and probation rely heavily on rules, thresholds and categorisation. Decisions are often shaped by what is recorded in assessments, eligibility criteria or policy frameworks. Practitioners described how important nuance can be lost when complex lives are reduced to what can be captured within these systems, and that part of their role is to bring that context back into decision-making.

In Carter's case, the most obvious example of him having to fit within rules that weren't aligned to his needs was the way decisions about work and financial support were applied.



Although he was motivated to increase his hours, the interaction between earnings and benefits meant that doing so could leave him worse off. From a system perspective, these rules were applied as they were intended. However, they did not take account of his wider situation or the importance of supporting him to move forward. This creating a situation where his progress was limited despite his efforts. Pete's role in this context involved recognising this tension, helping Carter to make sense of it, and advocating for approaches that better reflected his circumstances.

Across the cases we reviewed, this "whole-person advocacy" was not limited to major decisions. Practitioners described regularly engaging with what they referred to as "micro-decisions" – the many small decisions made across housing, probation, benefits and other systems that shape a young person's trajectory. This might involve clarifying context in multi-agency discussions, challenging assumptions, or ensuring that key information about young people's circumstances is understood and taken into account.

In the context of systems that often prioritise rules, processes and risk labels, ensuring that decisions reflect the whole person requires sustained engagement and, at times, careful challenge. For practitioners, this is not a one-off intervention but an ongoing function of the role – helping ensure that young people are not defined solely by what is written about them.

Absorbing the emotional and administrative load

Delivering this model of practice places significant emotional and cognitive demands on practitioners. The work described in the previous sections involves constant assessment, adjustment and coordination across multiple environments. Practitioners are making daily judgements about risk, safety, placement suitability, emerging pressures and the likely consequences of decisions. With large caseloads, this is happening for multiple young people at the same time.

Much of this labour remains invisible. Safeguarding emails, court preparation, multi-agency meetings, case recording, travel to custodial or accommodation settings, and liaison with housing and probation services take up a considerable proportion of practitioners' time. All of this sits alongside their direct work with young people.

Not only are practitioners dealing with high volumes of work, but the nature of that work is often emotionally demanding. Challenging decisions, advocating for appropriate support and pushing for progress requires persistence, particularly where systems are slow to respond or apply narrow criteria. Practitioners described the effort involved in repeatedly evidencing need, articulating context and ensuring that young people's situations are fully understood within decision-making processes. The complexity of the role is further compounded by variation across boroughs, where housing thresholds, processes and decision-makers differ, requiring practitioners to hold detailed knowledge of multiple local systems at once.

Practitioners also described how the role regularly stretches beyond its formal boundaries, creating additional strain and responsibility. For example, young people on their caseloads may at times experience acute mental health distress, including severe anxiety, trauma responses or episodes of psychosis. Youth justice practitioners are not clinically qualified to provide psychiatric treatment, yet in the absence of timely specialist support they are often the adults holding the situation day to day.

These practically and emotionally demanding aspects of the work sit alongside the fact that practitioners care deeply about the young people they support. Over time they build sustained relationships with young people whose circumstances are often unstable and, at times, dangerous. They come to understand their histories, their strengths and the pressures shaping their lives, and often experience their progress and setbacks alongside them. This relational aspect of the work adds to its emotional intensity, particularly where young people's circumstances remain uncertain.



By holding risk, managing fragmentation and persisting through repeated challenges, practitioners reduce the extent to which these pressures fall directly on the young person. Yet this level of sustained, complex work can take its toll both physically and emotionally. It also sits uneasily within commissioning structures that prioritise throughput, fixed timelines or narrowly defined outcomes, creating an additional pressure for practitioners, who often know what more could help a young person but do not have the capacity or resources to provide it.

A System Perspective

The themes described in this report - housing as a precondition for progress, the emotional impact of moving out of survival, and the structural barriers that can limit forward movement -were echoed in interviews with professionals working across youth justice, probation, policing, housing and mental health services. This section draws on those conversations to show how the dynamics in Carter's story are recognised by people working across different parts of the system.

Professionals from every part of the system described housing as a critical foundation, without which nothing else can move forward. One stakeholder in a Youth Violence Team at a local authority told us that housing instability was "probably the most recurring theme" across her caseload. However, what came through just as clearly was the recognition that housing alone is not enough and that in practice, the gap between being housed and being safe is often significant. A psychologist working alongside the team highlighted the difference between securing housing and meeting young people's needs: "It's amazing to get somebody into housing and so they're safe, but it's often not very nice housing and not in the right place." Another stakeholder working in a Violence Reduction Team at a local authority said: "Sometimes different professional agencies just think that moving [young people] is enough. But I think what is important is making sure it's the right place - and providing support after that." Carter's experience reflects exactly this dynamic - getting housed was essential, but it was the sustained support that followed, not the housing itself, that made progress possible.

Stakeholders also described what happens when crisis begins to settle. One youth practitioner at a partner Vanguard project noted that when young people are living in chaos, "they don't really stop to focus on [their mental health], but that when things quieten, "that's when a lot of those feelings start to come up." Another practitioner working at a charity partner organisation observed that emotional dysregulation at this stage is often misinterpreted as "kicking off," when in reality "nobody is supporting them to regulate their emotions." A probation officer described the patience young people need in these situations: "He just needs time… some time to breathe and come back in, then he'd come." These accounts echo what Pete recognised in Carter, that withdrawal was not disengagement, but part of processing what he had been carrying for so long.

Aligned with our findings in this report, stakeholders identified consistent, trusted relationships as central to progress. A psychologist reflected on the importance warmth and presence in building effective working relationships: "If you were just quite a cold external service, I'm not sure you'd then be able to work as well on [these] cases." A local authority Violence Team professional emphasised the need for longevity in support relationships: "It's not just a case you go and move them and say goodbye. You are now going to be a part of this family's life for a period." For Carter, Pete's steady presence - including the time that appeared to achieve little on paper - was what enabled him to stay connected through a difficult period.

As Carter began to stabilise, his strengths and interests became more visible. Professionals described this as a recognisable shift. A police officer reflected on the importance of having someone who can "sit down with them and… talk to them about what they want to do… and what opportunities there are," making it more likely that young people begin to move forward. A practitioner working with young people in a charity partner organisation similarly noted that when young people are given the opportunity to engage in different activities, something shifts. For Carter, the cycle shop provided that opening.

But stakeholders also identified the same structural barriers evident in Carter's experience. One practitioner in a charity partner organisation highlighted the financial pressures of temporary accommodation: "I've waited eight weeks and now I have to go to a hotel where I'm paying £300 a week… and the benefits won't cover majority of that." Such comments reflect systems built around assumptions that do not align with young people's lived realities. For Carter, this was evident in the tension between wanting to increase his working hours and the financial consequences of doing so.

These accounts do not tell a different story from Carter's. They confirm that the dynamics outlined in this report that shape his experience are recognised by professionals across the system. What came through clearly was how hard people in every part of that system are working to support young people like Carter. The barriers they described were not about a lack of commitment or care, but about structural conditions - housing shortages, inflexible benefit rules, fragmented services and under-resourced teams - that make it difficult to provide the consistency and stability young people need. The challenges are systemic, and so are the solutions.



From Insight to Action

The recommendations below are directed at the wider systems and services involved in supporting young people to find and maintain stability once they've found a place to live. They are grounded in the learning from Carter's story, alongside wider insights from the evaluation, and reflect the conditions that appear to support young people to move beyond survival and begin to make progress.

They focus on how these conditions can be built more consistently into systems, so that stability and progress do not depend on individual practitioners alone.

Recognise moving into accommodation as the start of a new phase of support

Through this case study, we have demonstrated that moving into accommodation marks the beginning of a new phase of a young person's journey, rather than an end point. Whilst immediate risks to physical safety might reduce, new challenges often emerge, including those related to emotional adjustment, isolation, and the practical realities of living independently.

We recommend that systems move away from treating accommodation as an endpoint, and instead recognise the period that follows as a critical phase requiring continued support. This includes:

- **maintaining support beyond the point of placement, rather than stepping back once housing has been secured;**

- **recognising the emotional and psychological impact of moving out of survival, including withdrawal, low mood or increased anxiety, and avoiding misinterpretation of these responses as lack of motivation or progress;**

- **ensuring that expectations during this period are realistic and allow for adjustment over time.**

Recognising this phase as part of the journey, rather than a sign that support is no longer needed, will help prevent disengagement and reduce the risk of placements breaking down.



Provide ongoing relational support during the transition to stability

Carter's story highlights the importance of consistent, trusted relationships during the transition from survival into stability. As his circumstances changed, the support he needed also evolved, particularly as he began to process past experiences and adjust to his new environment.

We recommend that systems place greater emphasis on maintaining consistent relational support during this period. This includes:

- **ensuring that young people have a named and consistent practitioner who remains involved as circumstances change, avoiding abrupt endings or**

"cliff-edges" in support as thresholds are reached or services step back;

• allowing flexibility in how support is delivered, including adjusting expectations and pace in response to a young person's needs; and

• recognising that "low-level" engagement, such as simply being present, can play a critical role in maintaining connection.

This approach can help young people remain engaged at points where they may otherwise withdraw, supporting more sustained progress over time.

Ensure systems enable young people to move forward

Carter's experience highlights how systems can unintentionally limit young people's ability to move forward, even when they are motivated to do so. We recommend that systems are reviewed to ensure they support young people to move forward, rather than hold them back.

This includes:

• addressing financial disincentives that make it difficult for young people to increase their income without risking housing stability;

• improving access to financial support (such as grants or deposit schemes) that enable young people to take next steps; and

• ensuring that employment pathways are realistic and accessible for young people with criminal records or disrupted education.

Without these changes, young people may become stuck, increasing the likelihood that they move backwards rather than forward.



Take a whole-person approach to decision-making across systems

Carter's experience of trying to increase his hours at work without losing income illustrates how the fixed rules and thresholds that shape decisions often do not reflect a young person's wider circumstances or support their progress.

We recommend that a 'whole-person' approach is applied more consistently across systems, not only in housing decisions, but also in areas such as financial support and access to specialist services. This includes:

- **taking account of factors such as trauma, mental health needs, neurodiversity and developmental disruption when applying rules or thresholds;**

- **ensuring that practitioners' insight into a young person's circumstances is incorporated into decision-making; and**

- **creating space for flexibility where strict application of rules would undermine progress.**

This approach will help ensure that decisions made at a system level help to support young people to move forward in a meaningful way.

Improve access to specialist and ongoing support

As Carter began to stabilise, access to therapy played an important role in helping him understand and manage his experiences. Many young people in this cohort would benefit from ongoing psychological input, yet this is rarely treated as a core part of housing provision.

We recommend that systems strengthen access to appropriate specialist support, particularly during this phase.

This includes:

- **recognising psychological support as a core component of stability, rather than an optional or secondary service;**

- **ensuring timely access to appropriate provision, so that support is available when young people are ready to engage; and**

- **commissioning support that can be sustained over time, rather than limited to short-term or crisis-led interventions.**

This will help ensure that young people are able to manage the emotional impact of transition, rather than becoming overwhelmed at a point where stability is still fragile.

Recognise and resource the work that enables stability and progression

Carter's case highlights how much sits behind supporting a young person to secure and maintain accommodation. This role of youth justice workers is complex, multifaceted and emotionally demanding. Practitioners are managing competing pressures, responding to uncertainty, and supporting young people through situations that are often unstable and, at times, distressing. Much of this work remains largely invisible within formal systems, despite being central to achieving and sustaining progress.

We recommend that systems are designed to better support this work, rather than relying on individual practitioners to absorb its demands. This includes ensuring that caseloads reflect the time required for system-facing work and allowing space for reflective practice and supervision. Without these considerations, practitioners are left carrying sustained pressure without the support they need to do the role well. Over time, this risks burnout and turnover, which in turn disrupts the continuity that is so critical to young people's progress.

Conclusion

Carter's story brings together experiences from young people supported by the Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre. It shows how moving into accommodation can mark a critical shift, creating the conditions for young people to begin moving beyond immediate survival and start rebuilding their lives.

Across the evaluation, several consistent patterns were evident. Progress tended to become possible once a degree of stability had been established. However, stability was shaped by more than simply having somewhere to live. Whether young people were able to move forward depended on how safe and in control they felt, the consistency of their day-to-day lives, and the presence of supportive relationships. Even where accommodation was secured, it did not always provide the conditions needed for young people to settle or sustain progress.

Moreover, young people often encountered barriers that limited their ability to move forward, even when they had found relative stability and were motivated to do so. Access to financial support, specialist services and employment opportunities was often limited, and systems were not always designed to support progression once initial stability had been achieved. These challenges were structural, shaping both the pace and sustainability of progress.

Carter's story also shows what it takes to support young people through this stage of their journey. Practitioners remained closely involved as young people's circumstances changed, maintaining connection during periods of withdrawal, adapting their approach as needs evolved, and supporting young people to navigate new systems and expectations. This work extended beyond practical coordination, helping young people to manage the emotional impact of transition and sustain progress at a pace they could manage.

Providing this level of consistent, relational and system-facing support often depends on individual practitioners working within systems that are not designed to offer the same level of flexibility or continuity. The challenges described throughout this report are structural, and they shape not only access to stability, but what happens in the longer-term. The recommendations set out identify practical ways these conditions can be addressed, with the aim of supporting young people to move forward and sustain progress over time.

