N H

DEAN'S STORY



Supporting young people and their families

Youth Justice Work at New Horizon Youth Centre

Y C

NEW HORIZON YOUTH CENTRE

CONTENTS

Introduction 3

Dean's story 4
Dean's perspective 4
Carla's perspective 6

From Experience to Insight 9
Family relationships are integral to young people's journey 9
Decisions about safety are often shaped by a narrow understanding of risk 10
Relocation affects entire families, not just the young person 11
Separation can lead to isolation and emotional strain 12
Decisions about relocation and separation involve complex trade-offs 13
Young people often cannot be supported effectively in isolation 13

The Youth Justice Team Practice Model 14
Dynamic risk management and safety planning 15
Managing pressures created elsewhere 16
Maintaining continuity across transitions 16
Supporting young people and families to navigate complex, fragmented systems 17
Embedding lived context in decision-making 18
Absorbing the emotional and administrative load 18

A System Perspective 20

From Insight to Action 22
Take a 'whole-person' approach to decisions about relocation and separation 22
Avoid default responses in decisions about relocation 22
Strengthen how relational risk is understood in decisions about relocation 23
Increase the availability of housing options to support whole-family relocation 23
Plan for the ongoing impact of relocation and separation 24
Recognise and resource the work required to support young people and their families 24

Conclusion 25

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 that family relationships play in shaping young people's trajectories, particularly in the context of relocation or separation, and the impact this has on those around them.

Drawing on learning from a wider evaluation of youth justice practice at New Horizon Youth Centre[1], it examines how decisions made to keep young people safe affect both young people and their families, and the support needed during these transitions.

Dean'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 supported by the Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre. Many had histories shaped by overlapping challenges, including exposure to violence, family disruption, unstable housing, and a range of unmet needs, particularly around mental health and neurodivergence.

The case includes both a young person's narrative and a corresponding practitioner perspective, offering insight into how these experiences are experienced and navigated from both sides. Dean's perspective highlights the complex trade-offs involved in decisions about relocation and separation, and how attempts to reduce risk can sometimes create new challenges for young people and their families. The practitioner perspective shows what it takes to support young people and families through these decisions in practice, including balancing competing risks, maintaining relationships, and supporting connection across distance and disruption. 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.



[1] Funded by Propel and the National Lottery Community Fund, exploring the team's work between April 2023 and March 2026.

Dean's story

Dean's perspective

In my ***family, all the males don't really do stuff with their lives. The older girls and my sisters, they've all gone to university, got degrees, but all the men, they just end up in jail.***

My mum's single, she has me and three other kids. My dad and her, they have a toxic relationship - sometimes he's there, sometimes he's not.

I'm 13 and I'm thinking I'm a man at that point. I'm thinking let me give her one less head in the house to worry about. Even just little things, topping up the gas or helping out with things around the house. Certain things are happening outside. You've got friends doing stuff and they're saying this is easy, so I'm feeling entitled to do stuff too. I was just trying to be a man, trying to grow up too fast.

Where I grew up, everything felt fiery. There was always pressure, always that feeling that you had to be switched on. So even when I knew certain things were risky, it didn't feel like there were loads of safe options. It felt like survival - trying to help at home and stay standing at the same time.

> ***I knew bad came with it. I knew that it was not the right path to go down, but I still wanted to do it anyway. It was an attractive lifestyle.*** *- Dean*

I was 15 when I first got stabbed and shot at. There's certain things that as a 15-year-old, you shouldn't be having to go through. But I don't like playing the victim. It's not like I'm getting shot at for no reason.

The next year the violence came ***right outside my door. I got stabbed again, by my heart, by my rib cage. So I was bleeding a lot. My little sister was the one holding my wounds with towels and that. She might seem like it's not a big deal, but I know deep down that it would leave us some trauma.***

When I was in hospital, ***people were trying to shoot my family. People still pulling up to my mum's house, taking videos, screaming my name, telling me to come downstairs.*** *They were* ***taunting my little sister*** *as well, asking where I was. I was really worried about my family's safety.*

Around that time it felt like ***my social worker was trying to manipulate my mum, trying to say if you don't move, she'll take all your other kids.*** *They were trying to keep us safe, but mum was already feeling* ***paranoid*** *and frightened, so* ***she just wanted to move so she'd have all her kids.*** *So we moved all together at first, to stay together. Although I* ***wasn't really trying to move because my whole life I'd been*** *in that area. Nobody else wanted to either.*

The focus at that time was just on me. ***They're forgetting that my mum is a single woman, by herself with four kids. She has to go to work, make sure that bills are paid, that everyone's eating. But they're not factoring all of that in. They're just factoring in her son, he's getting arrested, he's got stabbed. They're not talking about how my sister goes to school, she's getting brilliant GCSEs.***

When you're singling out one child, all the other children are suffering. My sisters were still going to school in our old area *because my mum* ***didn't want them to move school where they've already had all their friends.*** *But it was a long way to travel*

and they felt embarrassed about everything going on.

The places we were living were nasty too. One room for all 5 of us, dirty bathrooms. One time, ***when they moved us into a room, it was covered in bedbugs.*** *I hated that my family were in that situation because of me.*

But when I turned 18, that had to stop. My family could move back to where we were originally from, but I couldn't because of certain gang stuff. *I wanted them to go back because I knew it would make them happier, but it meant that I didn't have anywhere to live and would be on my own. So a woman that we knew who worked in social care referred me to New Horizon to try and find me somewhere safe to live.*

I met a couple of different people at first, but Carla was the main one. She helped me sort somewhere to live through housing. I ended up in another temporary place in a different borough.



I didn't know anyone there, which was kind of the point. At first, I liked it. It was calm. No one was watching me or knocking on the door asking where I'd been. I could go out and come back and ***no one knew my face.***

But after a while, it got dark in a different way. At first, ***I just saw it as a new opportunity, at least I can get out of the area.*** *But once the move had happened and everything went quiet, it was difficult.* ***It was kind of getting lonely.***

I thought I was sorted because I'd been handling myself for years and dealt with worse things, but living by yourself is a different kind of pressure. ***There's so many different forms every day.*** *I was busy in my head already, and then all of a sudden I've got housing responsibility as well. Something came through about council tax and I ignored it because I didn't understand it. Then another one came saying I owed more money.*

It's a headache, honestly. *When you've come from a completely different lifestyle and you're suddenly meant to just* ***start functioning like a normal person.*** *Get into routines, open your post, clean up properly and keep on top of things. No one really tells you how hard those things can be.*

The kitchen was a mess within a week because I didn't really know how often you're meant to clean. At home, my mum used to just do things. I'd ring her to ask random things like where do you buy washing powder, what do you do if the shower won't drain, things like that. Half the time we'd end up arguing anyway – probably because we were both stressed out.

Me not being there was meant to make things calmer at home, and maybe it did. But it also meant my mum was worrying from further away. She couldn't see if I got back safe. She couldn't just shout up the stairs or look in my room. My sisters stopped texting me as much. I think they were annoyed with me. Or maybe they just didn't know what to say.

That time was really dark – I hated it. But Carla stayed involved and came to see me. She helped me with a lot of the practical things. ***She would sit down, talk to me***

about it, we'd do it together so I'd have a better understanding *- what I needed to reply to, what deadlines I'd missed. It felt stupid sometimes, being shown things I felt like I should already know. But I needed it. Before she helped, it was all doing my head in. But after we'd done it together, I felt like I understood a bit more – so I could do it on my own afterwards.*

I really got on with Carla. ***She didn't talk to me like she was above me.*** *She didn't make me feel like I was just another case like I'd had in sometimes before. She spoke to me properly, on a level. Sometimes that practical help was the main thing. But other times it was just good having someone there who would listen and not judge me.* ***She was like a shield*** *in some ways.* ***Like a witness*** *to what I was trying to do with myself, if that makes sense.*

But Carla couldn't be there all the time, of course. ***She's always so busy.*** *Sometimes I'd text her and it would take a while to hear back,* ***obviously she's human.*** *There were days I didn't go out at all. It felt safer that way, but it was dead as well. Too much time to think. I missed the noise at home, even the arguments. When you've grown up in a full house, silence doesn't always feel peaceful, if you know what I mean.*

Sometimes I'd get on the bus and go back without really planning to. I wouldn't always go in. ***I knew it was a risk****, but* ***I was lonely*** *- and sometimes I just wanted to be near home. It felt like choosing between risking my freedom and keeping myself together in my head.*

Carla and I spoke about that a lot. She never acted like it was simple. She said we had to think about the best way to keep everyone safe, even if it didn't feel good right now. She understood that getting housed doesn't just fix you. If anything, once everything goes quiet, all the stuff you've been running from starts catching up with you.

That's still where I'm at, really. I'm still in the flat. Still figuring out the basics. Still trying to get into a routine. Still learning how to live differently. I see my mum most weeks, but it's different now. Quieter. Sometimes better. Sometimes worse.

> ***I had to change the mindset of the whole life I'm living, the things I'm doing, my whole lifestyle, I had to change it.***
> *- Dean*

I don't think I'd be able to do it if I wasn't in my own house. *It hasn't solved everything, but* ***it's like the anchor of everything. It's what starts everything.*** *When you're not just surviving day to day, you actually have to look at yourself properly.*

When my mum sees me make forward progression, trying to progress in my life, she's very happy for me. She sees I'm trying to break out of a cycle which is hard to break out of, but when you put your mind to something you can do it. She's really proud of me.

Carla's perspective

I started working with Dean after he turned 18, when he could no longer stay with his family.

By the time he was referred to me, a lot had already happened. The violence wasn't just impacting Dean, it had put his family under enormous strain. They were living out the consequences of everything too.

The immediate issue was that his family could return to their home area, but given what had happened there was no way he could go. There are some stories that are really hard to hear, you know, and Dean's was one of them. I really can't imagine it. So he was on his own, but he needed somewhere

else to live - somewhere he could be safe and try and start again.

I worked with housing to get him housed. Compared to some cases, it was actually pretty quick. I think because of his history it was quite hard to argue with the risks. That's not to say it's always straightforward even when the risks are huge. It often depends on the borough and who you're working with. But in this borough I knew the housing manager well, so it all moved pretty fast.

The flat he was placed in was ok. It was self-contained and in a nice area. He did well. It was in a different borough too. Different to where his family were and different to where he lived at the time. Whilst it was a bit further out than we really wanted, it was a good place. So I didn't feel like I should argue. The distance was a good thing really anyway – it meant he had a chance of properly starting over, which is what he needed.

At first, he was relieved to have something of his own. He was really stressed when his family decided to move back. He lost it with me a few times, but I got it. He's been bounced around so much and it just felt like more of the same. So when he got there he described it as calm. No one knew him there, so he could let his guard down a bit. And from a safeguarding point of view, that mattered.

But very quickly, things started to change. Dean was so grown up in so many ways – probably because of what he's been through. But he didn't know how to live by himself. Within weeks, it was clear he was really struggling with the basics - unopened letters, bills he didn't understand, cooking for himself. It wasn't a lack of ability. It was a lack of having ever had to do it alone. I spent time going through practical things with him that most young people learn gradually. I was aware that this could feel exposing for him. He saw himself as really independent. So admitting he didn't know how to manage things like council tax or his electric was difficult.



Then there was his mum. How much contact I have with young people's families really depends on the situation. You're aware that you can't get sucked into things because the young person is who you're working with.

> ***But sometimes people don't understand that young people's families are part of who they are. So in some cases you can't help the young person without supporting the family too.***
> *- Carla*

Dean's relationship with his mum was really important to him. They were really close and always have been. So it was so hard for her to be away from him. She was in an impossible position as a parent – she moved back because she knew it would be better for her daughters. But then she felt like she was abandoning Dean. I can't imagine what that must have been like, especially as she's on her own.

But since the family has moved back there's been a lot of tension. Dean started telling me about the arguments a couple of weeks after he moved into his new place. I think everyone is just feeling overwhelmed, but it's not helping Dean to settle.

I haven't done much directly with the family – there hasn't been time - but we have had a few calls all together – and I've been to see his mum once. I think talking to me has helped her because it makes her feel like she's still involved in some way, even though Dean isn't there anymore. Obviously I had to be careful what I said to her because of confidentiality, but Dean was happy for me to see her. He's worried about his family too.

In terms of his conditions, I don't think Dean always saw the level of risk in returning to his home borough. He understood the restrictions, but he had grown so used to living with that level of risk that it didn't seem to register in the same way for him. We had repeated conversations about recall, about what custody would mean for him. I was particularly concerned about that. He'd somehow avoided jail so far and had managed in community settings, but a custodial environment would likely be significantly more challenging for him. He would listen. He would nod. But I knew it wasn't really sinking in. From a risk management perspective, that was concerning. From a human perspective, it made sense.

There were limits to what I could do to support Dean. I cared about him deeply and wanted to be consistent, but I had a large caseload and couldn't always respond straight away. I know there were times when he needed more than I was able to offer in the moment. But when you have other young people in crisis, that's what has to come first. That is one of the hardest parts of this work - knowing how important consistency is, but not always being able to provide it.

I think the big thing about Dean's case is the complexity of his transition. Moving him reduced an immediate risk to him and to his family, but it also highlighted how much support a young person needs to build a different life once they are in safer accommodation. Dean has strength, insight and a real desire to do things differently. He's really trying to break a cycle he's seen around him for years. But wanting that change and living it are two very different things.



From Experience to Insight

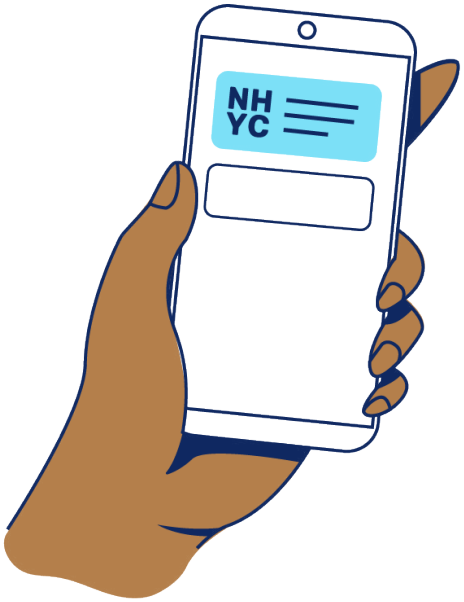
Dean's story reflects several recurring themes that we observed across the wider evaluation. While presented as one narrative, it illustrates dynamics that appeared in different forms across multiple young people's experiences. The sections below describe the most consistent patterns.

Family relationships are integral to young people's journeys

Across the cases we reviewed, family relationships were central to young people's identities, sense of belonging and the decisions they made. In Dean's case, his choices, and the situations he found himself in, were closely tied to his role within his family. From a young age, he described feeling a sense of responsibility to support his mother and reduce pressure at home, "trying to be a man" and stepping into a role that went beyond his age. He recognised that this urge to be useful within his family had played a part in his involvement in risk-taking and offending. Later in his story, when his family were able to move back to their home borough without him, we also see his decision-making shaped by how he felt the situation was impacting his family, showing that they remained a constant consideration for him.

This way of thinking was not unique to Dean. Across the cases we reviewed as part of the evaluation, young people rarely described their situations in isolation from their families. Many spoke about the impact of their experiences on parents, siblings or others close to them, and about trying, in different ways, to reduce pressure on family members or keep those around them safe. This shaped young people's choices about who to spend time with, how they spent their time, where they stayed, and who they turned to for support.

Family relationships varied across the cohort. Whilst there were some examples of young people being totally estranged from their families, this was rare. Most young people described strong emotional connections to parents, siblings or extended family members, even where circumstances were difficult. These relationships were characterised by care, loyalty and a mutual sense of responsibility. In many cases, family members did a great deal to support young people, including providing practical help and advocating for support from other services. There was often a clear willingness to support, but the conditions families were living within – including exposure to violence, financial pressure and unstable housing at the family-level – made it difficult to provide that support consistently.



Even where families were absent, whether due to geography (for example, among those seeking asylum whose families were in other countries) or because relationships had broken down or become strained, family ties continued to shape young people's thinking and choices. Some described wanting to rebuild relationships, while others remained focused on protecting or supporting family members from a distance.

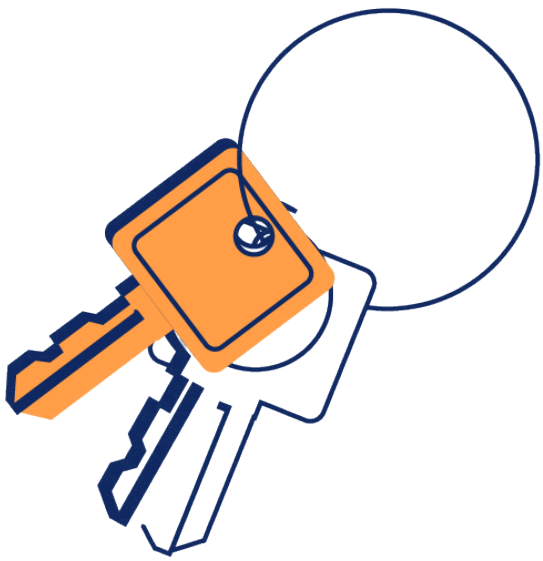
Strong family ties also meant that the risks associated with young people's experiences, and the impact of decisions, were often

experienced collectively. In Dean's story, the violence directed towards him had immediate implications for his whole family. His mum and siblings were drawn into the situation, experiencing fear and disruption alongside him. Decisions about whether to move, where to live, and how to stay safe affected the entire household. This pattern was evident across many cases. While decisions often appeared to relate to one young person, their impact was rarely contained to them. Moves, restrictions and changes in living arrangements affected family relationships, shaping both the young person's sense of connection and the lives of those around them.

Decisions about safety are often shaped by a narrow understanding of risk

As illustrated by Dean's case, young people's decisions and experiences are often shaped by their relationships with family members. However, at a system level, decisions about safety are typically made with a primary focus on the individual young person, without fully taking this wider relational context into account.

In situations of high risk linked to a geographical area, responses tend to focus on relocation. This may involve moving a young person away from their home environment, or relocating the family as a whole.



Dean's case illustrates both approaches in practice, with his family relocated at one point, and him later supported to live separately when they returned to their home borough without him. As explored in later sections, each approach carried different implications for both Dean and his family, highlighting the complexity of these decisions.

In practice, decisions are often made in contexts of urgency and limited options. As a result, the focus tends to be on managing immediate, and often physical, safety. This can mean that risk is understood more narrowly than it is experienced by young people, with less attention given to the relational and longer-term consequences of separating families or disrupting key relationships.

Practitioners described how, without a full understanding of young people's wider circumstances, decisions could be disproportionately shaped by factors such as age. Those over 18 were more likely to be treated as independent from their families, regardless of how able they were to cope on their own in practice. This relates to what practitioners described as an ongoing pattern of adultification in services, where young people – particularly young Black men – may be seen as more able to cope independently, and less in need of protection, than their circumstances would suggest.

Even where a broader set of factors was considered, what was feasible was often constrained by structural limitations. In particular, the limited availability of suitable housing for whole families meant that, across the cases we reviewed, young people were more likely to be separated from their families than moved with them.

Practitioners had observed this pattern intensifying in recent years, as mechanisms that previously enabled families to relocate together while retaining their housing

security have been withdrawn[2]. This has left fewer viable options where risk within the home cannot be managed, forcing young people to be separated from their families, not because this reflects what they need or want, but because there are no workable alternatives that allow families to remain together safely.

Relocation affects entire families, not just the young person

While separating young people from their families was more common across the cases we reviewed, there were also instances where families were relocated together. Dean's story illustrates this, with his family initially moved to a different borough in response to the escalating risks they were facing. This relocation had implications for the whole household, with his mother and siblings experiencing ongoing fear and uncertainty alongside significant disruption to their daily lives, including changes to where they lived, how they travelled, and how they maintained schooling, work and relationships.

This pattern was evident across the cases we reviewed. Relocation, whether involving the young person alone or the family as a whole, often had significant consequences for siblings, parents and wider family networks. Practitioners described siblings travelling long distances to remain in the same school, parents navigating unfamiliar areas without established support, and families losing connection to communities that had previously provided stability. In many cases, relocation redistributed disruption across the household, rather than resolving it.

Alongside these practical challenges, families were often managing high levels of emotional strain. Practitioners described the pressure on parents trying to keep multiple children safe while maintaining some sense of normality, and the impact on siblings whose routines, friendships and stability had been disrupted.

Relocation therefore cannot be understood as a contained intervention. Even where it improves safety in one respect, it can introduce new pressures elsewhere, affecting both the young person and those around them. As Dean's story illustrates, actions taken to protect one family member can reshape the experience of the entire household.



[2] The Pan-London Housing Reciprocal previously enabled social housing tenants to relocate across boroughs in response to risk while retaining their secure tenancy. Without this route, families become less able or willing to move, leaving services with far fewer viable options to support whole-family relocation, even where safety concerns are significant.

Separation can lead to isolation and emotional strain

As discussed, it was common across the cases we reviewed for young people to be separated from their families when it was no longer safe for them to remain in, or return to, their home area. While this could reduce immediate harm, living away from family often introduced new challenges for both young people and their families. In Dean's case, although he was initially moved with his family, the pressures this created for his mother and siblings ultimately led them to return to their home borough, leaving him to manage independently.

Practitioners described how young people often experienced loneliness and disorientation when living apart from their families, particularly when placed in unfamiliar areas without established relationships or support networks. For many, moving away from environments associated with risk also meant losing a sense of connection and belonging, as well as the informal support they would usually rely on.

This transition could be difficult to manage. After long periods of living in unstable or high-risk situations, some young people found the transition to quieter, more isolated environments challenging. In the absence of familiar routines, relationships or distractions, difficult thoughts and emotions could become more prominent. What might appear safer in physical terms did not always feel easier to sustain in practice.

Alongside this, separation shaped how young people understood themselves in relation to those around them. Practitioners described how being moved away could create tensions around loyalty and identity, particularly where young people felt closely connected to their families or wider social networks. Leaving these environments, even where they carried risk, could feel like stepping away from important parts of who they were, or from the roles they had come to occupy within their families and communities. In addition, especially where young people played a caring role within their family (for example, supporting siblings or unwell parents), many young people continued to feel responsible for their families or concerned about their wellbeing, even once they had been removed.



As we saw reflected in Dean's case, these factors could combine to create an ongoing pull towards connection, even where risks remained. In practice, this could make separation difficult to sustain. Where placements lacked a sense of connection or support, returning to familiar environments or relationships could begin to feel more manageable than staying away. As a result, approaches intended to improve safety could, over time, increase the likelihood of young people re-engaging with harmful people, environments or patterns of offending.

Decisions about relocation and separation involve complex trade-offs

Because of the challenges outlined above, decisions about relocation rarely involved straightforward choices for families and those supporting them. Practitioners described often working on cases where every available option carried risks and trade-offs. Moving young people on their own could reduce immediate exposure to harm, but often led to isolation. Relocating the family as a whole could preserve connection between young people and their family networks, but involved significant disruption for parents, siblings and wider family members. In this way, decisions were rarely experienced as a choice between 'safe' and 'unsafe', but rather between different forms of risk and challenge. Dean's experience reflects this, with both approaches used at different points, each creating a different set of pressures for him and his family.

Within this context, difficult tensions emerged within families. Responding to risk often meant balancing the safety of one young person against the day to day needs of siblings and the stability of the wider family. In Dean's case, the decision to move the family initially, and later for him to live separately, reflected these competing pressures and the need to adapt to and navigate them over time.

In the vast majority of cases we reviewed, every option involved some level of disruption or loss. As a result, as we will explore further below, the work did not end with the decision itself, but continued as families adapted to the realities it created, with practitioners supporting them to manage the consequences of choices where every option carried costs.

Young people often cannot be supported effectively in isolation

As the previous sections highlight, the impact of the challenges young people are navigating extends far beyond the individual. In this context, practitioners described how working only with the young person could limit what could be achieved in practice.

While individual support was necessary in all cases, on its own it did not always address the wider relational context shaping young people's lives, or the pressures being experienced by those around them Practitioners felt that opportunities to work with families, or to strengthen the relationships that continued to influence young people's decisions, were not always fully realised. In some cases, this meant that families were left to manage significant challenges with limited support in place. This was evident in Dean's experience, where the pressures on his mother and siblings ultimately led to their relocation not being sustained and Dean being left to manage alone.



Practitioners described wanting to provide support that reflected the wider needs of young people and their families, but doing so within systems that were primarily organised around the individual. As we saw from Carla's account, capacity, resource constraints and service boundaries often limited the extent to which this wider work could be undertaken, leaving young people to manage complex situations without the broader support needed to sustain 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 that we observed. 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 Dean's account and Carla's reflections to illustrate how these functions operate in practice as practitioners support young people and their families to navigate relocation, separation and the process of establishing and sustaining stability.

Dynamic risk management and safety planning

Risk management within the Youth Justice Team is not something that happens only during formal reviews or at particular stages in young people's journeys. 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.

Dean's situation was complex and unfolded over time, with the risks he was facing evolving continually. While his family was initially relocated together to keep them safe, this created challenges, particularly in the pressures it placed on the family. When the move away from the borough was not sustained, a new set of risks emerged as he began living separately from them. Carla's role involved working with Dean to navigate this changing landscape, continually reassessing how risk was evolving in practice and adapting her approach in response to changes in his circumstances.

A key aspect of this work involved recognising the tension between keeping Dean safe in an immediate, physical sense and supporting his connection to his family. Despite his changing circumstances, Dean's relationship with his family remained central to his life. When he was eventually separated from them, Carla understood that the pull he felt to return to familiar environments was a consequence of this. As such, rather than seeing his behaviour as defiant, she responded carefully and without judgement. She worked with him to understand how he was feeling and to find ways of maintaining connection that did not undermine his safety. At all stages of his journey, Carla drew on direct conversations with Dean, listening carefully to his perspective on what would help keep him safe, alongside information from other sources, including accounts from his family, to build a fuller picture of what was happening and adjust her approach accordingly.

An important part of the youth justice practitioner's role involves communicating the risks experienced by young people to other agencies. Many of the professionals involved in housing decisions do not have ongoing relationships with the young people concerned. Practitioners told us that they



often find themselves explaining the wider context of a young person's situation and helping other agencies understand how different forms of risk interact. In Dean's case, this included helping those responsible for housing decisions understand the potential consequences of each course of action – on Dean, but also on his wider family members.

Dean's story shows how quickly the conditions around a young person can shift, and the implications this has for their safety. Supporting young people in this context means staying close to what is happening, revisiting plans as situations evolve, and responding to risks as they emerge. Practitioners reflected on how much time and judgement this requires, as well as the responsibility involved in making decisions that can shape both immediate safety and longer-term outcomes.

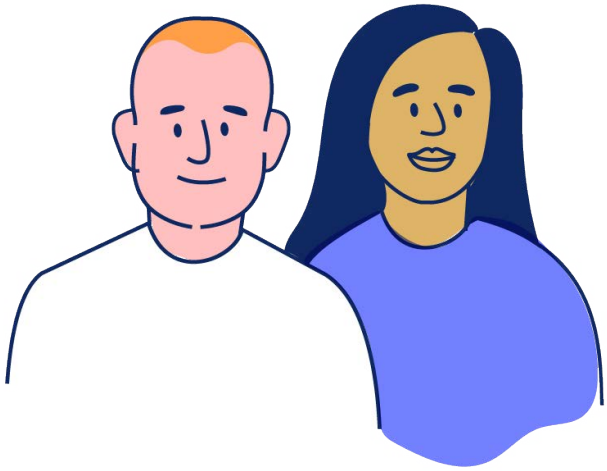
Managing pressures created elsewhere

Many of the pressures shaping Dean's situation sat outside the direct control of the Youth Justice Team. Decisions about relocation, separation from his family, and the environments he was living in were shaped by housing availability, local authority thresholds and wider safeguarding responses. Practitioners described this as a consistent feature of their work - supporting young people within systems where key decisions are made elsewhere, often with limited flexibility.

In Dean's case, Carla's role involved responding to the decisions that affected him in different ways over time. Where there was scope to do so, she advocated for arrangements that better reflected the needs of him and his family. Otherwise, much of her work involved supporting them to manage the impact of decisions that had already been made, including helping him understand why he could not return home when his family did and supporting both him and his mother through the practical and emotional consequences of separation.

In practice, this involved a significant amount of ongoing coordination and follow-up. Carla maintained contact with housing and other services, shared information about how different arrangements were affecting Dean and his family, and continued to advocate for adjustments where possible. Alongside this, she remained closely involved in Dean's day-to-day experience, helping him manage the impact of each change on both his practical circumstances and emotional health.

Dean's experience highlights how progress is shaped not by a single decision, but by the interaction of multiple system factors over time. Supporting young people in this context involves not only advocating for change, but working with the consequences of decisions made elsewhere, shaping how they are experienced in practice and buffering against their potentially negative impact.



Maintaining continuity across transitions

Dean's experience involved multiple transitions, including relocation, separation from his family, and changes in his living arrangements. These shifts were not always predictable and, at times, happened quickly, with limited opportunity for preparation. As a result, the conditions surrounding his life could change significantly over short periods of time.

Throughout these transitions, Carla remained a consistent presence. As well as helping him respond to immediate challenges, she supported him to make sense of what was happening, helping him understand why decisions had been made, what they might mean in practice, and how he might manage the changes he was facing. While the environments around Dean changed, the continuity of this relationship with Carla gave him something stable to hold onto whilst everything else changed.

Across the cases, practitioners described transitions as points where support can easily become fragmented. Changes in accommodation, moves in and out of custody and age-related thresholds often meant that new professionals became involved while others stepped back. For young people, this could involve having to re-explain their situation, rebuild trust, and adapt to new expectations at the same time as managing the transitions themselves. Without consistent support, these changes in support could add to the sense of disruption, making already challenging periods harder to navigate.

In practice, maintaining this continuity was not always straightforward. Where young people were placed away from their local area, staying involved could require significant time and resource, particularly where travel was involved. Across the cases, there was a clear understanding among practitioners of the importance of continuity, particularly in circumstances where the risk of isolation was heightened. However, as illustrated by Carla's experience of supporting Dean, maintaining this level of involvement alongside other demands could be challenging.

Supporting young people and families to navigate complex, fragmented systems

Dean's experience involved navigating housing and safeguarding processes within a wider system of support that was not always easy to follow. These processes often involved multiple agencies, each with their own requirements, thresholds and ways of working. This reflected wider patterns in the data, with practitioners consistently describing systems as complex, fragmented and difficult for young people and families to navigate, particularly when they were already managing significant stress. Processes often involved multiple professionals, repeated requests for information and limited communication between services. For families, this could mean trying to understand decisions that had far-reaching consequences without always having a clear sense of how or why they had been made.

Carla played a key role in helping Dean and his family navigate the systems around them. This involved explaining what was happening, helping them understand what different services were asking for, and supporting them to make sense of decisions about housing and the restrictions placed on Dean. It also involved communicating with services on their behalf, following up on decisions, and ensuring that the implications of different arrangements were understood in practice.



Across the cases, practitioners described this work as involving a balance between supporting young people and families to engage with systems themselves, and stepping in more directly where needed. While building understanding was important,

there were also points where the demands of the situation meant that young people and families did not have the capacity to navigate processes alone. In these situations, without more active support, there was a risk of confusion, delay or disengagement.

Dean's experience highlights how navigating systems is not simply about accessing services, but about being supported through processes that can otherwise feel unclear or overwhelming. In this context, practitioners play a key role in helping young people and families understand decisions, engage with systems, and manage the implications of what has been agreed.

Embedding lived context in decision-making

Dean's story demonstrates the importance of ensuring that decisions about safety, relocation and support take account of young people's wider circumstances, particularly their relationships with family. In his case, whether decisions were appropriate or sustainable depended less on formal indicators such as age, offending history or recorded risk levels, and more on the nuance of his family circumstances and the role those relationships played in his life. Decisions affecting where he lived and whether he could remain with or return to his family were shaped by formal assessments and recorded information. However, these did not always fully capture the realities of his situation, including the strength of his family connections and the impact that separation would have on both him and those around him.

Practitioners described this as a wider feature of the systems they were working within. Decisions are often shaped by what is recorded in assessments, referrals or case notes, with complex lives reduced to what can be documented. In this process, important context can be lost, particularly where relationships, emotional impact and lived experience are not easily reflected in formal records.

Carla played a key role in ensuring that Dean's situation was more fully understood within decision-making processes. This involved advocating for him in discussions with housing and other services, explaining why certain arrangements would or would not work, and ensuring that the importance of his connection to his family, and the implications of separation, were consistently recognised. Across the cases we reviewed, this kind of "whole-person advocacy" was not limited to key moments or formal decision points. Practitioners described regularly engaging with what they referred to as "micro-decisions" – the many small decisions made across housing and other services that, over time, shape a young person's trajectory. This might involve drafting emails to different stakeholders, clarifying context during multi-agency discussions, or accompanying young people to meetings to support them to articulate their needs in a way services would understand.

Part of this work also involves bringing in other professionals who can help build a fuller understanding of the young person's needs. This includes working with psychologists and other specialists to undertake assessments where appropriate, helping to ensure that trauma, neurodiversity or mental health needs are recognised within statutory processes.

In systems that often prioritise rules, processes and risk categories, ensuring that decisions reflect the whole person, and the families around them, requires sustained engagement and, at times, careful challenge. For practitioners, this is an ongoing part 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 the model of practice we have described in the above sections places significant emotional and cognitive demands on practitioners. As illustrated

by Dean's case, the work involves constant assessment, adjustment and coordination across multiple services and systems. Practitioners are managing ongoing communication with housing teams and other agencies, tracking progress, responding to new information and making daily judgements about safety, placement suitability and emerging pressures. With large caseloads, this is happening for multiple young people at the same time.

Much of this labour remains invisible. Emails, referrals, repeated requests for information, multi-agency communication, case recording and time spent following up on decisions take up a considerable proportion of practitioners' time. All of this sits alongside their direct work with young people and families.



Not only are practitioners managing high volumes of work, but the nature of that work is often emotionally demanding. Challenging decisions, advocating for more suitable arrangements and pushing for progress requires persistence, particularly where systems are slow to respond or work within narrow, inflexible processes. Practitioners described the extensive effort involved in repeatedly evidencing need, articulating context and ensuring that young people's situations are fully understood within decision-making processes. This was reflected in Carla's work with Dean and his family, where ensuring that the impact of separation and the importance of family connection were recognised required her ongoing focus and engagement.

Practitioners also described how the role regularly stretches beyond its formal boundaries, creating additional strain and responsibility. Young people may at times experience high levels of anxiety, distress or trauma, particularly when they are living in unstable or unfamiliar environments. While youth justice practitioners are not clinically trained to provide therapeutic support, they are often the people holding the situation day to day.

By holding risk, managing fragmentation and persisting through repeated challenges, practitioners reduce the extent to which these pressures fall directly on the young person and their family. 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. This can create 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 above were consistently recognised by professionals working across the system. Their accounts reinforced how familiar the patterns described in Dean's story are, while also highlighting tensions between what is understood to be effective and what is possible in practice.

One of the clearest points of agreement was the central role of family. Professionals did not describe family as a background factor, but as integral to how young people experience risk, make decisions and respond to support. As one practitioner working for a charity partner organisation reflected, the impact of youth violence is rarely contained to the individual. Instead, it "*puts your life on hold… you're unsettled… it's almost like you're on a hamster wheel. There's lots of emotions playing up from the parents and then also it can lead to hostile family living, it's arguments, it's disruption, it's a lot of pressure*" capturing the ongoing strain young people's situations place on those around them.

Professionals also spoke in direct terms about the differences between moving young people individually and relocating families as a whole. While individual moves were more common, particularly in the context of limited housing stock suitable for relocating whole families, they were widely understood to increase the risk of isolation and disengagement. As one local authority gangs team practitioner described, "*When you move them individually, there is a greater risk of them coming back because there is that feeling of isolation, that feeling of loss*." In contrast, relocating families together was often seen as more likely to support stability and sustain change, with the same person noting that "*once you move the family, they are more stable and they're more likely to then accept that move*."

Professionals also described what happens following separation. While moves are often framed as protective, practitioners spoke about the isolation that can follow, particularly when young people are placed in unfamiliar environments away from their support networks. There was recognition of the emotional upheaval that these moves can involve, with a youth practitioner at a partner Vanguard project saying - "*that's when a lot of those feelings start to come up*" - and of the link between this isolation and returns to unsafe environments. As one practitioner at a charity partner organisation put it, "*We see risk, they see community.*"

In Dean's story, the decisions that led to his separation from his family were not straightforward. At various points, his mother faced an impossible dilemma: move to protect most of her children, or stay and risk losing them all. In line with this, professionals consistently described families and young people being placed in situations where no choice felt right. In many cases, structural factors exacerbated this, limiting the options available.

Alongside this, professionals highlighted the limits of working with young people in isolation when their wellbeing remains closely tied to their families. As one practitioner in a local authority gangs team put it, "*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.*" Effective support was often described as involving ongoing work with both young people and those around them. This was reflected in Carla's approach, where contact with Dean's mum and wider family was central to her work, rather than an additional element.

However, this way of working was also described as demanding and difficult to sustain. Practitioners spoke about the emotional intensity of frontline roles and the challenge of maintaining consistent relationships alongside wider caseload

pressures. As one psychologist noted, "*Frontline work like this is so hard… it burns you out really fast. And I think how we sustain people in that work is a really important question*." Carla described this tension directly - wanting to be consistently available to Dean, while managing competing demands on her time.

Clinical professionals working alongside the service offered a further layer of understanding. A Vanguard worker described how extremely high rates of PTSD and complex trauma within this group[3] fundamentally shape how young people experience and respond to risk. Prolonged exposure to violence can mean that a young person's nervous system adapts to threat as a baseline - what professionals recognise as high risk, the young person may experience as simply ordinary. This is the dynamic Carla described in Dean's case: he understood the formal restrictions around returning to his home borough, but the level of risk did not register for him in the way it did for those around him. From a trauma-informed perspective, this is not surprising. As the Vanguard worker reflected, these young people present with "very complex needs and vulnerabilities which are not well understood in mainstream services," including the ways in which trauma reshapes their relationship to danger, their capacity to navigate complex processes, and their ability to tolerate the housing environments they are offered. For young people like Dean, the gap between what systems expect of them and what they are realistically able to manage is often far wider than it appears on paper.

These accounts do not tell a different story from Dean's. They confirm that the dynamics shaping his experience - the centrality of family, the cascading impact of relocation decisions, the isolation that follows separation, and the complex trade-offs that families navigate - are recognised by professionals working across the system. The barriers they described were not about a lack of commitment or care, but about the conditions within which support is delivered, and the limits these place on what is possible.



[3] Half (51%) of the young people supported by the Youth Justice Team during the funding period had a clinical diagnosis of PTSD which compares with 4% of the overall UK population; NHS Digital (2014). Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2014.

From Insight to Action

The recommendations below are directed at the wider systems and services involved in supporting young people affected by serious youth violence to access and sustain safe and stable accommodation. They are grounded in the learning from Dean's story, alongside wider insights from the evaluation, and reflect the conditions required for decisions about relocation and separation to be safe, workable and sustainable in practice.

The recommendations focus on how these conditions can be built more consistently into systems, so that support better reflects the interconnected experiences of young people and their families.

Take a 'whole-person' approach to decisions about relocation and separation

Dean's case illustrates how decisions about safety, relocation and accommodation can be shaped by narrow interpretations of risk or need, rather than a fuller understanding of a young person's experiences and circumstances. In his case, whether arrangements were appropriate or sustainable depended not only on formal indicators such as age, offence history or recorded risk, but on the nuance of his family relationships and the role they played in his life.

We recommend that decisions are not based solely on written assessments or thresholds. Instead, they should be informed by a wider range of factors, including family relationships, experience of trauma, mental health needs, neurodiversity, and formal and informal support networks. Taking this 'whole-person' approach will help agencies better understand what will make arrangements feel safe, manageable and sustainable in practice.

We recognise that statutory services are often working under significant pressure, and it is not always possible for them to build a detailed, whole-person understanding of every young person they work with. This makes it essential that they work closely with practitioners who do hold that understanding. The insight of these practitioners should be given greater weight in decision-making and brought into discussions early enough to shape outcomes.



Avoid default responses in decisions about relocation

Across the cases we reviewed, the default response to high-risk situations involving youth violence was often to move young people on their own, particularly once they reached adulthood. However, interviews with professionals across the system suggested that, in many circumstances, relocating whole families can better support longer-term stability, in part because it avoids the isolation that can follow separation.

At the same time, as illustrated by Dean's story, whole-family relocation can bring significant disruption and pressure for parents, siblings and wider family networks. Neither approach should operate as a default.

We recommend that decisions about relocation are made on the basis of individual circumstances. This must involve:

- **considering the likely impact of both individual and whole-family relocation on the young person and family members;**

- **avoiding assumptions that young people over 18 can or should be treated as independent from their families, and recognising how adultification can shape perceptions of young people's maturity and capacity to cope alone, particularly for young Black men; and**

- **ensuring that decisions are not driven primarily by availability, but by what is most likely to be workable in practice.**

Strengthen how relational risk is understood in decisions about relocation

Dean's experience shows that relocation does not remove risk, but changes it. While decisions often prioritise immediate physical safety, less visible risks, particularly those linked to separation from family, isolation and loss of support, are not always fully considered.

We recommend that risk assessment processes take a more structured and comprehensive approach. This should include explicit consideration of how separation from family and support networks is likely to affect a young person over time, including the risk of isolation and the impact this may have on their behaviour, wellbeing and decision-making.

This would help ensure that decisions are not based solely on availability or immediate measures of safety, but reflect how arrangements are likely to be experienced in practice. Where risks are identified, there should be a clear plan for how these will be monitored and managed over time.

Increase the availability of housing options to support whole-family relocation

Across the cases we reviewed, decisions about relocation were often shaped not only by risk and need, but by what housing options were available in practice. In particular, the limited availability of suitable accommodation for whole families meant that young people were frequently moved on their own, even where maintaining family connection may have better supported stability. Professionals across the system described this as a key constraint.

We recommend that greater attention is given to ensuring that housing systems are able to support a wider range of responses to the challenges faced by young people in the cohort supported by the Youth Justice Team. This includes increasing the availability of accommodation that enables whole-family relocation where this is assessed as the most appropriate option.

In other contexts, such as supporting families experiencing domestic abuse, systems are designed to enable rapid access to suitable accommodation for whole households. A similar level of consideration should be given in this context, recognising the risks associated with youth violence and the importance of maintaining family stability where possible.



Plan for the ongoing impact of relocation and separation

Dean's case shows that the impact of decisions about relocation and separation does not end once a placement is made. These decisions create ongoing practical and emotional consequences for both young people and their families, which require active support over time.

We recommend that systems move away from viewing relocation or separation as discrete interventions, and instead plan for their ongoing impact. This includes:

- **recognising the emotional strain and disruption created for both young people and their families;**

- **ensuring that support is in place to help families manage separation and maintain connection; and**

- **building in ongoing review points to assess how arrangements are working in practice.**

Without this, there is a risk that initial decisions create new pressures that undermine longer-term stability.



Recognise and resource the work required to support young people and their families

Dean's case highlights how closely young people's experiences are intertwined with those of their families. Decisions about safety, relocation and separation do not affect young people in isolation, but have direct and ongoing implications for parents, siblings and wider family networks. As a result, supporting young people effectively requires working with the wider family context.

We recommend that systems are designed to better support this work. This includes:

- **ensuring caseloads reflect the time required for coordination, advocacy and relational work across both young people and their families;**

- **recognising that supporting families is a core part of the role, particularly where decisions about relocation and separation directly affect them; and**

- **providing space for reflective practice and supervision.**

Without this, practitioners are left absorbing significant emotional and administrative pressure, undermining their capacity to provide consistent, relational support to both young people and their families.

Conclusion

Dean's story illustrates the complexity of supporting young people affected by serious youth violence, and the central role that family relationships play in shaping their experiences, decisions and trajectories. Across the evaluation, young people were not navigating risk in isolation. Their lives were closely intertwined with those of their families, with relationships influencing how risk was experienced, how decisions were made, and what felt possible in practice.

However, the systems designed to support them are often structured around the individual. Decisions about safety, relocation and accommodation tend to prioritise immediate, physical risk, without fully accounting for the relational context in which young people live. As a result, actions intended to reduce harm can introduce new challenges, including isolation, disruption to identity and belonging, and pressures on families that are difficult to sustain over time.

The findings highlight that relocation and separation are not standalone interventions, but processes with ongoing consequences for both young people and their families. In many cases, there is no option that does not involve trade-offs. Supporting young people effectively therefore requires not only careful decision-making at the point of relocation, but sustained support to help them and their families manage the realities that follow.

The Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre demonstrates how this can be approached in practice. Through relational, adaptive and context-aware work, practitioners support young people to navigate complex systems, manage shifting risks, and begin to build stability. However, this work takes place within wider structural constraints that limit what is possible, including housing availability, service fragmentation and resource pressures.

The findings from the evaluation point to the need for a shift in how systems understand and respond to risk. Approaches that recognise the interconnected experiences of young people and their families, and that account for both immediate safety and longer-term relational stability, are more likely to support sustainable change. Without this, there is a risk that well-intentioned decisions continue to reproduce the very challenges they seek to resolve.

