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MALIK'S STORY



The impact of custody on young people's journeys

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 (YJT) 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 what custody can mean for their lives, with a particular focus on how housing and the support surrounding it shape their journeys before, during and after release.

Drawing on learning from a wider evaluation of youth justice practice at New Horizon Youth Centre[1], it examines custody not just as time spent in prison, but as something that can have lasting psychological and developmental consequences, particularly in the context of ongoing housing instability.

Malik'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 YJT following custody. Many had histories shaped by complex, overlapping challenges, including care experience, exclusion from education, neurodivergence, and exposure to exploitation or serious violence.

The case includes both a young person's narrative and a corresponding practitioner perspective, offering insight into how custody and release are experienced and navigated from both sides. Malik's perspective highlights how young people's experiences of custody can shape their expectations of safety, relationships and authority after release, and why rebuilding stability requires more than simply a roof over their head when they return to the community. Nadia's perspective offers insight into the realities of being a youth justice practitioner at New Horizon Youth Centre. It shows the level of relational consistency and practical support that goes into supporting young people at this stage - and highlights the pressures and constraints that shape the work. 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.

Malik's story

Malik's perspective

I grew up in care, so I'm used to having people involved. Social workers, probation workers. People saying they could help, but ***nobody actually did anything.*** *I can't even remember who was who.* ***I have no reason to trust them.***

> ***I got kicked out of school when I was 14. After that it kind of felt like the path was already set. Most people I knew who got kicked out and went to a PRU ended up in prison at some point — even if it was just for six months for a knife or something. It's like a pipeline.*** *– Malik*

When I first went inside, people said it might do me good. At least I'd be out of the madness for a while. And in some ways, I get what they meant. Prison is not calm, but some things were predictable. ***The same loop every day for years, the same faces, the same people, the same regime.*** *You knew when the doors would open and when they'd shut again. There was a routine, and that helped my head. Outside, everything was chaos.*



After a couple of times going in and out, I stopped thinking it would lead anywhere. ***I just felt stuck in this circle, going round and round with no hope.***

You learn quickly how to act inside. Don't look weak. Don't ask too many questions. Don't trust people. I learned to keep my face straight and stay alert, even when I was exhausted. When I eventually had a cell on my own, I kept everything lined up properly - cups, tea bags, sugar. It sounds small, but having it just how I wanted helped me settle.

There were times when it almost felt normal. In one place there were classes and things to do, and a couple of staff who were alright. For a while, I started thinking that maybe when I got out I could try something different.

That's when I first met Nadia. I didn't expect much at first – loads of services say they'll help. But she actually came to see me, sat down, explained what they do and how they could help. ***That's when I realised she was actually trying to help. She just talked to me normally, not like she was above me.*** *She didn't make promises. It was completely different to other professionals I've met. She asked what I was worried about. I actually told her I was scared.*

Then I got moved. No real explanation. Just told to pack up. That's normal in prison, but it still messes with your head. The worst part about going to a new prison is that ***you don't know if there's someone who's going to be there that you have problems with.***

When I first got there, I didn't hear from Nadia for a few weeks. But then I got a letter from

her, and I got her number to call her. It made a big difference knowing she was helping me sort things for when I got out.

***I wouldn't say I'm a violent person, but it gets to a point where I'll get too scared for my life. That will just get me doing stupid stuff** just to stay safe. Over time you build this prison version of yourself. It keeps you alive in there. But it doesn't just switch off when you come out.*

So as my release date got closer, everyone expected me to feel happy. I didn't. I hated it inside, but I knew the rules. Outside felt unpredictable. I didn't know what was gonna happen. It felt like pressure.

*The day I came out was mad. Probation, housing, licence conditions, forms. **So many different forms.** Everyone talking at once. **I've got learning difficulties, dyslexia.** I nodded but I didn't really take it in or understand properly. One of the big things was that I couldn't go back to my home borough. On paper it made sense, to keep me away from certain people. But that's also where my mum is. My cousins. All my support. So I'm thinking, **how can you ban me from where all my support is? That doesn't make sense. It felt like I was being set up.***

*The hotel they put me in didn't feel like a fresh start. The doors, the noise, the people - **I felt like I was in jail.** I did say I wasn't happy with it because **I'd just come out of jail and it just felt like a joke,** but **probation didn't listen.** So I was stuck there. I'd just sit in my room, in my head.*

*It was good being on my own **time scheme** for the first time, but it was hard too. I'd never been **self-accountable** like that before. And **if you have idle time, you get bored. Someone like me that has ADHD, I need to be doing something. I was bare paranoid about every little thing,** and I was just so tired. And **when you live in a hotel and you don't really have the funds to be ordering food, you'll just be eating pot noodles. So it just comes to me saying that maybe I should just go home, get some food.** Just see my mum.*

*So **once in a while I'll go back to the area, even though I know it's a risk. It was killing my mental health and I was getting lonely.***

***I'll be honest,** without Nadia **I would have just breached outright and just asked my probation officer to do my whole year back in jail. I didn't need to fake it or hide my problems** with her, I could tell her how I really felt, she didn't judge me. She kept saying, **"You're doing good. Just keep going."** She got me Ubers to the centre so I could go and do my music there, which always put me in a **positive mindset. It's like she tried to take all my stress away and carry it** for me. She was **patient,** even when I got **frustrated and pissed off.** Sometimes I would call her and shout about what was going on, but she never got mad at me. She went through my licence conditions with me again and again - because sometimes you need to be a professional to understand the language in those letters.*

> ***I'd already had four different probation officers on one sentence. You bond with one of them, and then they just leave. And you just think, well that was a waste of time. And then now we're asking the same question we answered a few weeks ago.*** *- Malik*

But Nadia helped with all the different people, helped me understand what was actually being asked of me, which helped.

*Eventually I got recalled. I was going back every day, hanging out with people I shouldn't be, getting back into my old life. It felt impossible not to, when the place I was living was so **depressing.** I was **lonely,** and I was **tired.***

Going back inside felt like I'd failed. But it also felt familiar. You slip straight back into routine. Head down. Don't ask too much.

This place is different from the last time. There's more fights breaking out, ***people with mental problems. There's lifers that have been here a long time. This jail is controlled by the prisoners. I've seen bad injuries, people getting stabbed, blood everywhere.*** *There's some really dangerous guys in here. Sometimes people offer to help, but then you owe them, so it's never that simple. You can't win whatever you do. You just focus on getting through each day.*

When I was recalled, I didn't think I would hear from Nadia again. I felt bad, like I had let her down. It was a surprise to hear from her, a good surprise though. No other professionals got in touch. I know she is doing as much as she can to help smooth things over for me whilst I am in here. She didn't judge me or say "we went through this." She just asked what happened and actually listened.

I've been in a ***dark place*** *this time, but Nadia has helped. She got me some paper and pencils and that, so I can draw whilst I am here. It's the one time my mind goes quiet. And she's helping me make plans before I get out. Where I'll stay. What I'll do in the evenings when my head gets loud. How to make the conditions work next time.*

Making change isn't always easy. *But I know* ***if I have a problem, I can just ask*** *Nadia. I know she* ***wants to see me do well.*** *She's helping me build my confidence and making me believe things could be different next time.*

My mum always says once you're in the system it's hard to break out of it. I'm 22 now and I've missed years of my life - important years. *But I don't want to keep hearing the* ***keys shaking and the doors slamming.*** *I don't want to have another birthday inside or miss things like my aunt's funeral.*

Nadia's perspective

I met Malik a few weeks before he was due for release. By that point he had already had lots of professionals involved in his life – social workers, probation, youth justice – but very little consistency. He often would not refer to workers by name, or be clear on who was responsible for what, because from his point of view they all blurred together. The starting point isn't to assume trust; it's the opposite. I had to build it through consistency, honesty, and practical action.

In the early days, he kept a lot to himself. He was not someone who came in and told you everything straight away. He would nod along, say he understood, keep his face steady. So a lot of the early work was just about showing up: visiting, explaining things properly, being honest about what I could and could not do, and not disappearing. It took months before he began to talk openly about what custody had actually been like for him - the fear, the pressure to act in ways that kept him safe, the version of himself he had to become inside. That was not something he offered up easily. It came gradually, through a lot of careful, patient conversation. Eventually, when we talked about release, he told me he was scared. He said it quietly, but it was one of the most important things he said to me.

Then he was moved unexpectedly to another prison. It was much further away, outside



London, and that changed things overnight. Visiting became a long journey and a bigger expense, and his family were much less able to get there. But it also felt like one of those moments where keeping contact really mattered, because from his side it could easily have felt like everything had just dropped away again. When a young person is moved, finding them again is not always straightforward. We are not always told where they have gone, and some young people have not given permission for information to be shared with us through probation, which means we can be reliant on them making contact from inside. That does not always happen quickly, if it happens at all. So I wrote to him, made sure he had my number, and kept trying to hold that link while we worked towards release.

People assume release is a positive moment. Sometimes it is. But more often, especially for young men who've been inside a while, it can be really stressful. Malik wasn't loud about it. He wasn't dramatic. He just seemed tense. Watchful.

The borough restriction was always going to be one of the hardest parts. I understood why it was there and so did he. But that borough is where his mum is. His cousins. All the people he knew, for better, for worse, were there. It's one thing to write "must not enter borough" on a licence. It's another thing to ask someone to rebuild their life somewhere that doesn't include their family, at 20 years old. At the same time, the housing side was moving in the way it often does before release — rushed, uncertain, with decisions happening late and not much room to think about what a placement will actually feel like for the young person living in it.



> ***By the time he came out, I was not just another professional meeting him for the first time at probation. There was already some trust there. Which definitely helped him get to appointments and keep in touch.***
>
> *- Nadia*

But he had a huge amount landing on him at once - licence conditions, housing, forms, appointments, different people all talking at him. He has dyslexia and ADHD, and a lot of that had never really been properly understood or supported. He would often look like he was taking things in when really he was overloaded.

The hotel did not help. He had just come out of prison and then found himself somewhere noisy, unsettled and institutional, with doors banging, people coming and going, and no real sense of calm. The effect on him was obvious, and compounded by his neurodiversity. He was spending more and more time in his room, not sleeping properly, getting more paranoid, more drained. There is a way some young men talk about prison routine helping their head, but what you see up close is that it is not health, it is survival. And when they come out into somewhere that keeps them in that same state of alert, they do not really get the chance to come down from it.

On paper, he was engaging. In reality, he was holding a lot. He wasn't sleeping properly and started to withdraw. He didn't recognise his feeling low and anxious as mental health needs, because it just felt normal to him. Hypervigilance, low mood, shutting down - that can just feel like everyday life. I found him space at the centre to do his music and arranged Ubers so he could get there. On the days he made it in, you could see the difference. He was lighter afterwards. It gave him somewhere to put the energy, somewhere to go, something outside that room.

I could see the pressures building. He was lonely, hungry, cut off from family and living somewhere that was making him feel worse. I knew the pull of home was strong, and I understood why. I told him to call me before things got on top of him, but I also knew I couldn't replace the feeling of belonging he got from being in that area. So the recall did not come out of nowhere. He made choices, yes, but those choices were shaped by the accommodation that he'd been placed in.

The recall was hard. For him, obviously. But I'd be lying if I said it didn't stay with me too. There's always that moment where you wonder whether something could have been handled differently. Whether you could have said or done something that might have helped. I still think about it.

At the same time, you're carrying other cases, other young people in crisis. You don't get to stop and process it for long. You just try to show up again. I went to see him as soon as I could. I didn't want him to feel like I was only on his side when things were going well. It's the times when they're not that young people need consistency most.

This prison was different, and I saw the impact on him straight away. He is surrounded by older prisoners, there is more violence, more instability. He's been attacked multiple times. He's lost a lot of weight. He's tried to end his own



life. I've done everything I can, I've made what feels like a thousand safer custody referrals. I send him money for canteen, but I don't know if he is actually leaving his cell to use it. I've got sketchbooks and art supplies for him, which hopefully give him a distraction and help connect him to who he is in there, and who he still could be on the outside.

Now he's coming up to release again, we're trying to be more practical about it. We sit with the paperwork and go through it again and again. We've also spoken to probation to see if we can agree on some conditions that don't set him up to fail. It's not simple, it rarely is. But we seem to be making some progress, so I'm optimistic.

I'm realistic about how hard it will be when he's out again. The conditions won't disappear. The pull of home won't disappear either. What feels different this time is that we're addressing that tension head on.

He knows where things unravelled before and I know where the pressure points are. So we're working together to work out how he can live within the rules without feeling like he's choosing between freedom and belonging. Despite everything, he has moments of positivity where he sees that change is possible. And the moments when he loses hope, I carry it for him.

From Experience to Insight

Malik'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.

Custody interrupts development

In our case study, Malik describes feeling "stuck in a circle" after being in custody multiple times, starting at age 14. The years he spent in custody coincided with a life stage when many of his peers were gradually building independence - not only learning practical skills like cooking, cleaning and money-management, but developing the confidence to solve problems, deal with setbacks and live without constant supervision or company.

For young people who spend significant time in custody, daily life is structured and managed by rules imposed by others. There are set routines within the prison walls and most practical tasks are taken care of. While many develop strong survival skills in response to risk and threat, there are fewer opportunities to practise the everyday decision-making needed for independent living.

The areas in which young people's skills are under-developed often become most visible at the point of release. Many lack the practical knowledge, confidence and day-to-day experience needed to manage responsibilities such as rent, service and utility charges, council tax, shopping and cooking. Yet these demands arrive all at once, and young people are expected to navigate them without support. Release can therefore represent a compressed and stressful transition into forms of independence that peers without custodial experience have typically developed gradually over time.

Malik felt a strong pull to go home, despite his licence conditions preventing him from doing so. Part of this was emotional – he wanted to "see his mum". But there were practical things too. He talked about wanting "some proper food" and found it difficult to occupy his time. For Malik, the time he had spent in custody had interrupted the gradual development of his independence, leaving him struggling to manage on his own. The licence conditions he was placed under were designed to reduce risk, but they made things harder by preventing him from accessing the informal support he was used to relying on, ultimately contributing to the pressures that led to his recall.

This pattern was echoed across several of the cases we reviewed. Practical



inexperience, combined with emotional isolation - particularly where accommodation was distant from familiar networks or came with its own challenges (e.g. shared facilities with other inexperienced young people) - made it harder for young people to find their footing after release. In these circumstances, short-term relief or familiarity - even where it carried longer-term risk – could become more appealing than attempting to struggle through alone. In this context, these choices were often less about poor judgement and more about young people trying to cope with the unstable circumstances they were living in.

Institutionalisation and the "prison self"

Malik described developing what he called a "prison version" of himself - a way of thinking and behaving that helped him survive within custody.

From the outside, prison can appear contained and predictable. But for the young people living there, safety is far from guaranteed. Young people may be placed on wings with others they already know from the community, including people they have existing conflicts with. New arrivals can shift the dynamics at any time, and transfers between wings or buildings bring new risks. For some, threats of physical harm were the norm. Young people also described being warned about what might happen on release - or even to family members - which added a further layer of anxiety.

In this environment, where there are constant power games to play, vigilance, guardedness and aggression are protective strategies. Over time, these strategies can become habitual, affecting how young people interpret and respond to all social situations.

When young people are released, the ways they have learned to cope persist, particularly during periods of transition when things feel uncertain. If a situation feels threatening, young people may withdraw, become guarded, or react quickly to protect themselves. From the outside, these reactions can sometimes be read as defiance or disengagement, leading to tighter controls or support being withdrawn. In reality, they are often responses shaped by previous experiences rather than a refusal to cooperate.

The interaction between this "prison self" and post-release environments is also important. Young people are frequently placed in shared or temporary accommodation with others who have experienced custody or similar challenges. Rather than entering spaces scaffolded by peers with broader social experience, they may find themselves living with people who are similarly mistrustful or guarded. In such situations, behaviours can amplify rather than regulate one another.

Custody is not one universal experience

Malik's experience of custody varied significantly depending on where he was placed, and this variation shaped his development, the support he needed, and the support Nadia was able to provide.

In some environments, there was more access to structured activity and education and a greater focus on preparation for release. In others, he was housed alongside older individuals, some serving longer sentences, where the culture felt less focused on development and reintegration and more on containment. The atmosphere was different, as were the risks and influences that surrounded him. These shifts in environment impacted not only Malik's day-to-day experience, but also how he began to see himself and what might be possible for his future.

Practitioners told us that young people are not always placed in settings designed for their age group. When space is limited, decisions about where someone goes can be driven more by availability than by what

would suit their developmental needs. The immediate priority becomes containment, rather than creating an environment that supports emotional regulation, skill-building or preparation for life back in the community.

Transfers between establishments also occur with little notice, which is stressful for the young person and impacts support. Staff described receiving minimal warning of moves, making it difficult to plan ongoing work or prepare young people for transition. For young people, each move means navigating new social dynamics, reassessing personal safety and attempting to re-establish stability.

Moving young people to distant locations has further implications. When young people are moved far from their home area, family contact can reduce, increasing isolation at a time when things are fragile. For services, travel time and cost increase substantially. Supporting one young person may require significantly more time, yet overall caseload expectations do not adjust to accommodate this.

Placement decisions therefore shape not only the level of support young people require, but also what support it is realistically possible to provide them. Staff described situations in which they judged that a young person required intensive contact following a move, but where team capacity limited what could be offered. Time invested in one case inevitably affects what is available elsewhere, creating difficult balancing decisions within already stretched teams.

The release cliff edge

As Malik's release date approached, while others assumed he would be happy to leave, he felt unsettled rather than excited. He spoke about knowing "the rules" inside and feeling uncertain about what awaited him when he left.

The day of release brought what he described as a "mad" sequence of appointments - "So many forms. Everyone talking at once." He nodded along but later reflected that he had not fully taken in what was being asked of him. The difficulty was not only the volume and nature of the requirements, but understanding how they fitted together - what each agency expected and how different conditions interacted.

On release, expectations ramped up. He was suddenly required to manage appointments, comply with conditions and organise his own time. Yet this increase in responsibility coincided with a dramatic shift in structure and support. The routine of custody fell away, along with the immediate presence of staff. At the same time, borough restrictions limited access to informal support that might have helped him navigate this period. "It made sense on paper," he acknowledged, but it excluded "all my support."



For many young people, this transition is particularly disorientating because during their time in custody they may have had little or no contact from professionals outside the prison. On release, they are expected to form relationships with a whole new network of professionals, many of whom, from the young person's perspective, are not experienced as sources of support but as figures that are continuing control over their lives. The power imbalance in these relationships is significant: these are people the young person does not know, yet they are making decisions that directly affect their freedom.

For many young people like Malik, rising demands alongside reduced support – or input from people they do not know - can feel like a destabilising cliff edge. Support may not disappear entirely, but it lessens at the very moment new challenges arise. Accommodation that feels isolating or unstable can make this worse, leaving the young person with a growing sense of being alone in their struggles. In Malik's case, even with Nadia's involvement, the conditions he found himself in made a return home feel inevitable. "It didn't really feel like a choice," he said.

The stories we heard showed release to be not simply a transition, but a withdrawal of structure and trusted support at a point of heightened vulnerability. Without sustained relational and practical scaffolding during this period, even the basic stability needed to meet expectations and comply with licence conditions can be difficult to sustain.

Rules that make stability harder

Malik was not recalled because of new offending behaviour. His recall followed repeated returns to his home borough, in breach of his licence conditions.

While the borough restriction "made sense on paper," it limited access to the people he described as his main source of support. At the same time, the accommodation he was placed in did not offer a meaningful alternative. He described feeling isolated, bored and unsettled. With limited money, little purposeful activity and few meaningful local connections, his post-release environment did not provide the foundations needed to move forward.

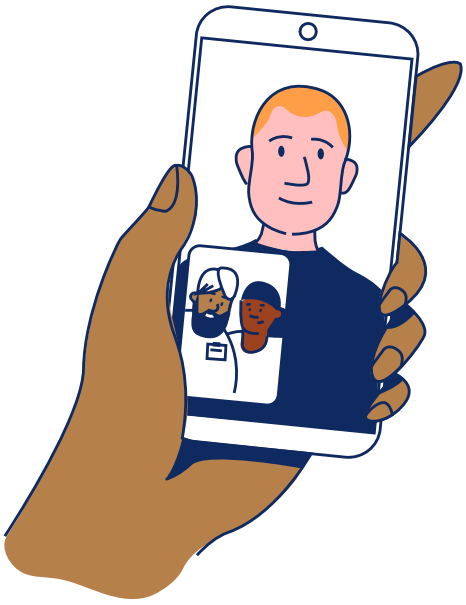
Licence conditions are designed to manage risk. However, when restrictions are too tight, they can limit young people's ability to form new relationships, access opportunities and begin building a life beyond what they have known. Establishing new routines and a sense of direction is difficult under any circumstances, it becomes considerably harder without stable foundations to work from. In Malik's case, geographical restrictions cut him off from the support he had always known. In other cases, fixed reporting times to probation or travel limitations made access to employment or education difficult. Whilst they might "make sense" in principle, such conditions can unintentionally narrow the space in which stability and autonomy can develop.

This creates a structural tension. Young people are expected to demonstrate responsibility and independence, yet the parameters within which they are operating often restrict their ability to shape routines, pursue opportunities or build supportive networks. Where accommodation is temporary or presents social challenges, that tension intensifies, leading young people to feel like they're in a no-win situation.

For practitioners, this increases both emotional and practical demands. Supporting young people to stick to their conditions involves more than making sure they understand them. It involves helping them structure their time, find new forms of connection and advocating for adjustments where possible. But there are limits to what practitioners can change when housing options are limited and licence conditions are fixed.

Unmet neurodiversity and mental health needs

Across the cohort, layered neurodivergent and mental health needs were common. Overall, 81% of the young people supported by the YJT during the evaluation period had diagnosed or suspected mental health needs, and over half (54%) were identified as neurodivergent. ADHD, autism spectrum conditions, dyslexia, dyspraxia, anxiety, depression and trauma-related symptoms frequently co-occurred. For many young people, these needs did not occur in isolation but overlapped in ways shaped by early adversity and exposure to violence and trauma. In some cases, conditions had been formally diagnosed, but in others they had not yet been recognised or fully understood within the systems surrounding the young person.



Practitioners were clear that young people's needs are not, in themselves, the problem. The difficulty arises when systems rely on rigid categories or standardised processes that leave little room to accommodate variation in how young people think, feel and experience the world around them. The team described working alongside psychologists to secure assessments where appropriate - not only to open pathways to suitable accommodation (which was common), but also to help young people make sense of their experiences. For some, receiving a diagnosis reduced tendencies toward self-blame and helped them think more realistically about what support they might need. Custody environments are structured, but they are also rigid, noisy and socially complex. Young people are expected to follow rules, manage their emotions and avoid reacting to situations that may feel threatening or provocative. For those already living with trauma, anxiety or neurodivergence, keeping that level of control can require constant effort.

In our case study, Malik described having ADHD and needing activity to regulate himself. At different points in his journey, this interacted with his environment in different ways. Inside, the constant need to stay alert and keep his emotions under control was exhausting. On release, long periods of unstructured time intensified his restlessness and left him stuck in his thoughts. In both contexts, the expectation was that he would adapt to the environment, rather than the environment adjusting around his needs.

The systems young people navigate around custody tend to operate through standardised processes and fixed expectations, and behaviour is often interpreted in relation to whether those expectations are being met. Practitioners work hard to consider individual circumstances, adapt their support and advocate for adjustments where they can. However, even where neurodivergence or mental health needs are recognised, this does not always translate into changes in practice. The wider systems surrounding young people often leave limited room to adapt how support is delivered, particularly under pressure. At times, this can mean that young people are expected to engage with formats or environments (for example, long, structured meetings or rigid expectations around behaviour) that do not work for them, rather than those environments being adjusted. As a result, signs of overwhelm may be interpreted as disengagement or defiance, rather than as an indication that support may need to change.

Relational continuity as a stabilising force

Across the cases, relational continuity emerged as a central stabilising factor, particularly during custody-related transitions, where systems were often fragmented.

Several of the young people we spoke to described being surrounded by multiple professionals, each responsible for a specific task. While formal "teams around the child" or multi-agency meetings were common, the purpose of these meetings - and who was involved - was often unclear to them. Different professionals came in and out of their lives, sometimes for quite specific tasks, and relationships could be short-lived. In the context of custody - where placements, conditions and support arrangements can change quickly - this shifting landscape could be particularly destabilising.

Against this backdrop, youth justice workers frequently became the people who held the whole picture together. Young people spoke of being able to approach them about anything - housing, licence conditions, family conflict, mental health concerns, worries about safety in custody, or practical problems on release - without needing to determine which issue fell under which professional remit. This whole-person approach reduced the burden of navigating systems alone and created a consistent point of contact across changing environments.

In Malik's case, Nadia's involvement remained consistent across different phases of his journey. She met him prior to release, explained her role clearly and talked through what was worrying him. When he told her he felt scared, she responded compassionately rather than focusing solely on procedural requirements. This combination of practical guidance and emotional responsiveness helped Malik develop trust in a context where services are often experienced as conditional or short-term.

The consistency of Nadia's support was also evident in how she responded to setbacks. When Malik began returning to his home borough, she did not withdraw or respond with judgement. When he was recalled, she did not disengage. Instead, she visited him again in custody despite the increased distance involved. Her stance was not dependent on his compliance with system rules. This signalled that the relationship itself was not contingent on success.

Across the cases we reviewed, this kind of relational continuity provided an important source of stability. Circumstances changed, conditions shifted and the systems around the young person often felt fragmented. In that uncertainty, the presence of a practitioner who remained involved and emotionally steady gave young people a consistent point of support from which they could begin to move forward.



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 Malik's account and Nadia's reflections to illustrate how these functions operate in practice during custody, release and recall.

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 their sense of what might place a young person at risk and what might help keep them safe.

In Malik's case, this began while he was still in custody. He spoke about tensions on his wing and the uncertainty of not knowing who might be placed there next. Nadia listened carefully to how Malik described what was happening around him and spoke with prison staff to build a clearer picture of the situation. When the tensions began to escalate, she advocated for him to be moved. Paying close attention to how young people describe their own sense of safety forms an important part of how practitioners build their understanding of risk.

After Malik's release, the focus of safety concerns changed, but they did not disappear. Nadia spent time with him talking through the realities of his accommodation, including who else was living there, how isolated he felt, and how far he was from the people he trusted. The borough restriction reduced exposure to some risks, but it also separated him from the relationships that helped him feel secure. Practitioners described situations like this as involving difficult judgements, where every option carries some form of risk. Part of the work involves sitting with these competing pressures and deciding which risks are most immediate and which might be manageable.

This process also involves regularly updating assessments as circumstances change. Shifts in accommodation, changes in peer networks, or even small changes in a young person's mood or behaviour can alter how a situation needs to be understood. Practitioners described spending time piecing together information from different sources, speaking with the young person themselves and adjusting plans as circumstances change.

Another important part of the role involves communicating these risks to other agencies. Many of the professionals involved in formal decision-making 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 behaviour and helping other agencies understand how different forms of risk interact. This might involve participating in formal safeguarding discussions or multi-agency meetings, while trying to ensure that the young person is seen as a whole person rather than through the lens of their offending behaviour or a single incident.

Malik's return to his home borough provides a clear example of this. From a formal perspective, the decision constituted a breach of his licence conditions. At the same time, Nadia understood it as an attempt to resolve feelings of insecurity and isolation. Part of her role involved communicating that wider context to other agencies, helping them understand that safety can involve emotional and relational factors as well as physical risk.

Malik's story shows how quickly the conditions around a young person can shift and the implications this has for their safety. Accommodation can change, placements can break down and relationships around a young person may shift quickly. Supporting young people safely therefore means staying close to what is happening in their lives and revisiting plans as situations evolve. Practitioners reflected on how much time this work takes, as well as the involvement of careful judgement and a willingness to carry significant responsibility for decisions that can shape a young person's immediate safety as well as their longer-term trajectory.

Managing pressures created elsewhere

Many of the pressures shaping Malik's situation sat outside the control of the Youth Justice Team. Housing shortages, temporary placements and the borough restriction attached to his licence all shaped the context in which Nadia was trying to support him.

When Malik was released, he did not move into stable accommodation. Instead, he was placed in a hotel that offered little opportunity to establish routine or stability. Long periods of unstructured time, distance from familiar relationships and the lack of basic facilities made everyday life more difficult. These conditions shaped how Malik experienced his days and the decisions he was making.

While practitioners spend significant time advocating for improvements to young people's accommodation, there are limits to what can be achieved, particularly within short timeframes. More often, they find themselves supporting young people to navigate situations that are far from ideal, as Nadia did for Malik. She spent time with him discussing how the situation was affecting his day-to-day life and what might help him begin rebuilding some stability while he was living away from home. Their conversations focused on routine, connection and where he might find support in his current circumstances.

Practitioners described an important distinction between planning a life around licence conditions and planning for stability while remaining mindful of them. In Malik's case, this meant focusing on how he could begin establishing structure and support while also revisiting the expectations attached to his licence conditions and considering the practical implications of the borough restriction.

Several practitioners highlighted a contrast between their long-term, stability-focused thinking and the way wider systems tend to operate. They spoke with frustration about how difficult it can be to prompt action before a situation reaches crisis point. While the YJT approach involves noticing pressures as they begin to build and trying to reduce them before they escalate into recall, remand or further harm, this can be difficult within a wider context often characterised by shorter-term, reactive responses.

Maintaining continuity across transitions

Transitions are a defining feature of many young people's journeys through the justice system. In Malik's case, these included entry into custody, release into the community, recall and a subsequent transfer to a prison outside London. Each shift brought a new environment, different expectations, and changes in who was involved in supporting him.

On paper, these movements can appear like routine steps in a process. In practice, they can be deeply unsettling. Moving into custody brings an abrupt change in environment and routine. Release removes the structure of custody, but often introduces new expectations and restrictions. Recall can interrupt progress and return young people to uncertainty. Being transferred to a prison further away adds distance from familiar people and places.

Nadia worked hard to maintain continuity for Malik throughout his journey. For example, when he was moved to a prison outside London, maintaining in-person contact was prioritised, even though it became more complicated. Because of Nadia's consistent presence, conversations could be picked up where they had left off rather than started again, and planning for release could build on what had already been learned about the pressures Malik faced.



Practitioners also noted that this kind of continuity can make an important emotional difference during periods of transition. Many young people are used to professionals coming and going, and to having to explain their situation repeatedly as services change around them. Having someone who remains alongside them can soften the impact of these shifts, providing a familiar point of contact at moments when much else is changing.

Practitioners described this continuity as something that has to be actively maintained, particularly within systems organised around rigid stages and processes. As young people move between custody and the community, different services become involved at different points, each with their own responsibilities and timeframes. Maintaining continuity in these circumstances requires practitioners to work differently from the structures around them - staying involved across different phases of a young person's journey, carrying forward knowledge of their circumstances, and ensuring that plans build on what has already been learned. This kind of involvement takes time and resource, but practitioners described it as essential during transitions, when young people's situations can change quickly and the risk of things unravelling is often highest.

Supporting young people to navigate complex systems

At different points in their journey through the justice system, young people come into contact with complex statutory processes and multiple professionals. Particular pinch points can include court appearances, entry into custody, prison transfers, recall decisions and engagement with housing or probation services in the community.

Each of these moments brings its own language, expectations and procedures. For young people, the experience can feel fragmented and difficult to follow, particularly when several professionals are involved at the same time.

Malik's story highlighted how structural procedures can often mean young people are presented with large amounts of information in unfamiliar settings. He described nodding along to explanations and signing documents that he did not fully absorb at the time. The practical meaning of elements like his licence conditions only became clear later, when he was trying to navigate them in everyday life.

Part of Nadia's role involved helping Malik make sense of these moments as they arose. She acted as a consistent point of contact, helping him understand who was responsible for different decisions, what would happen next, and how the different parts of the process connected. Rather than leaving him to piece together fragmented information alone, she helped bring clarity to situations that could otherwise feel confusing or overwhelming.

This often involved returning to conversations more than once, revisiting paperwork, explaining formal language and talking through how particular requirements might affect Malik's day-to-day life. It also meant accompanying him to court or other statutory appointments, helping these environments feel slightly less intimidating for Malik and ensuring he understood what was happening.

The practitioners we spoke to specifically highlighted the importance of clarifying for young people what they were entitled to within various statutory contexts. Young people are often eligible for forms of support that are not clearly communicated or are interpreted narrowly in practice. Helping them understand what support they can reasonably expect, and supporting them to access it, forms an important part of this navigational role.

Without this translation work, systems can feel confusing and difficult to navigate for young people. They may find themselves repeating information, waiting without clarity or feeling unsure about what is expected of them. This uncertainty can take a toll on their mental wellbeing and make it harder to manage other areas of their lives. With steady guidance from youth justice practitioners, processes that might otherwise feel destabilising become easier to understand and navigate.

Embedding lived context in decision-making

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

Justice and safeguarding systems rely heavily on documentation and categorisation. Decisions are often shaped by what appears in written summaries, incident reports or generic risk assessments. Practitioners told us that important nuance can easily be lost when complex lives are reduced to what is written on paper, and that part of their role is to counteract this.

In Malik's case, the impact of structural 'black and white thinking' became particularly visible when he returned to his home borough. His choice to go home was formally recorded as a breach of his licence conditions, which it was. But Nadia understood the behaviour within a wider context of isolation, attachment and emotional strain following his release. She also took into account how his ADHD and need for structure shaped how he experienced long periods of unoccupied time and restriction. Bringing this fuller picture into professional discussions influenced how his actions were interpreted and how subsequent decisions about his case were approached.

Across the stories we heard, this kind of "whole-person advocacy" was not limited

to key transition points, such as recall. Practitioners described regularly engaging with what they referred to as “micro-decisions” - the many small decisions made across housing, probation or safeguarding that, when taken together, 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 court or other meetings so that background and vulnerability can be clearly articulated.

Part of this work also involves bringing in other professionals who can help build a fuller understanding of the young person’s needs. A good example is the team’s work with psychologists and other specialists who are drafted in to undertake clinical assessments where appropriate. These assessments can lead to diagnoses that ensure neurodiversity, trauma or mental health needs are formally recognised within statutory processes.

In the context of systems that often prioritise rules, processes and risk labels, ensuring that decisions reflect the whole person involves 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.



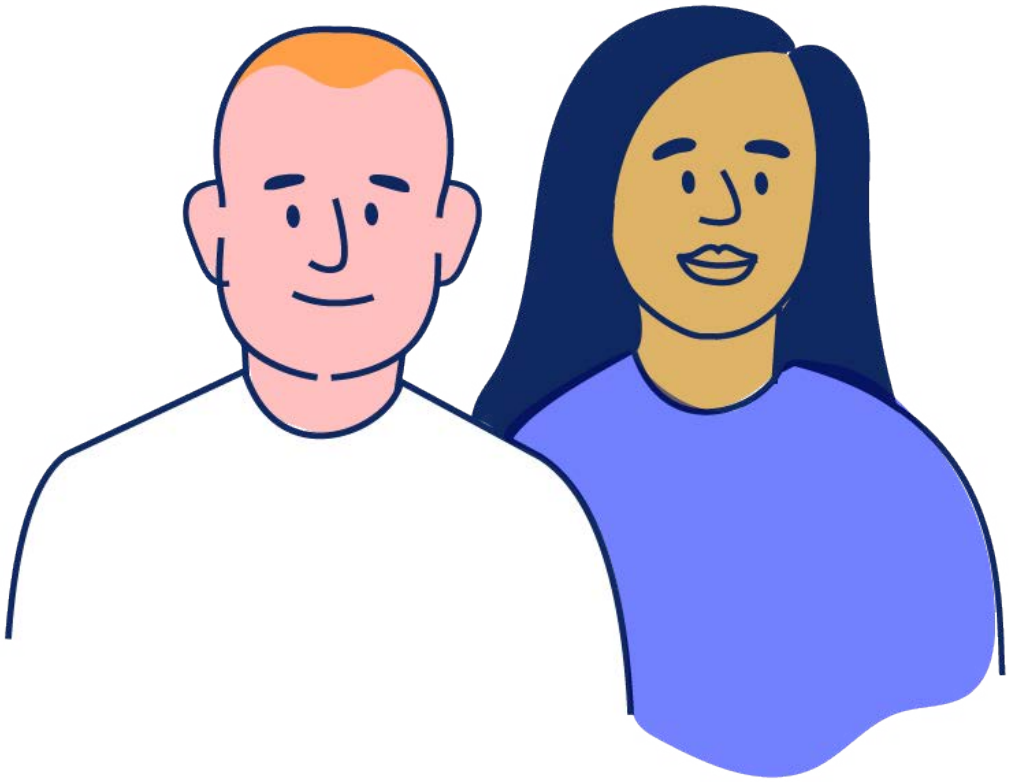
Not only are practitioners dealing with high volumes of work, but the nature of that work is often emotionally demanding. Challenging decisions, responding to written reports and pressing for reconsideration of placements requires persistence, and these conversations can at times be demanding or confrontational. Practitioners described the considerable effort involved in repeatedly evidencing risk, articulating context and defending young people’s entitlements within systems that often apply narrow criteria. 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, forming strong professional attachments. As Nadia's account demonstrates, when young people make progress practitioners experience that progress alongside them, and when setbacks occur - for example when a young person is recalled after a period of stability - they feel that too.

By holding risk, managing fragmentation and persisting through repeated challenges, practitioners reduce the extent to which those 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. This can create 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.

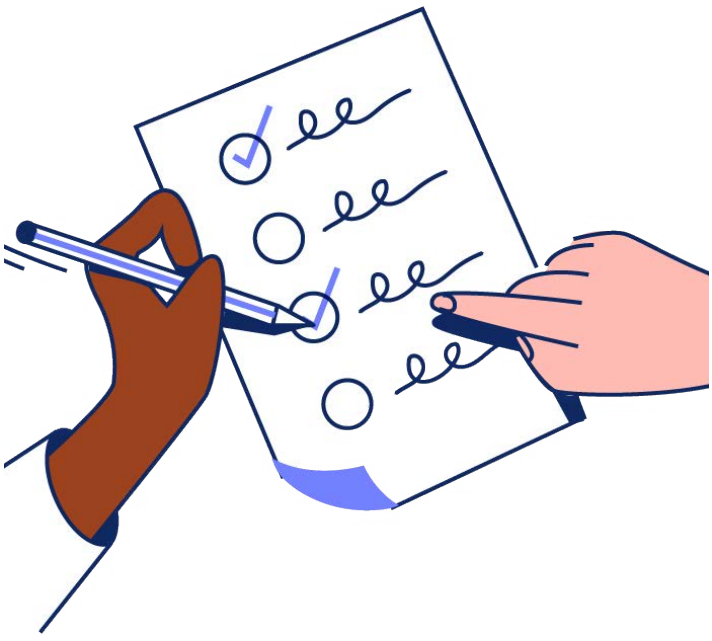


A System Perspective

The themes described above - the developmental impact of custody, the cliff edge of release, the tension between licence conditions and stability - 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 Malik's story are recognised by people working across different parts of the system.

Several spoke about what happens at the point of release. The picture they described was consistent: a sudden increase in demands at exactly the moment when structure and support fall away. One housing practitioner at a charity partner organisation described young people actively asking to be recalled to prison because they could not cope on the outside - "I even have prisoners say to me, I can't cope with this. I'm going to be recalled on purpose because I can't cope with being on the street... It's safer to be recalled than to just be out here."

Licence conditions were raised consistently as a source of tension. Professionals understood the purpose of the conditions,



but described cases where the restrictions bore little relation to the young person's actual circumstances. One professional supporting young people leaving custody in a local authority described a young person whose licence prohibited him from attending any "public gathering" - which, she pointed out, would include a sister's wedding or a christening. In some cases, the rationale for these conditions was unclear or weakly evidenced. In one instance, the police confirmed they had not provided the intelligence used to justify the restriction. Practitioners described this as creating a tension between the stated aim of public protection and the proportionality of the conditions being imposed. "There's a real fine line," the local authority professional said, "with public protection and breaching someone's human rights." These examples illustrate how conditions designed to manage risk can, in practice, narrow the space in which young people are able to rebuild their lives - echoing what Malik experienced when his borough restriction cut him off from the people and places that felt most like home.

Others confirmed that, when young people are recalled, it often has little to do with new offending. As one practitioner at a charity partner organisation put it, young people are often recalled because "they just can't get to grips with their licence conditions... they just can't manage." A probation officer described how the presence of a YJT caseworker had changed this dynamic for one young person. The caseworker knew his conditions well enough to remind him where he could and couldn't go, and was someone he trusted enough to call in a crisis. He stayed out of custody far longer than anyone had expected. The probation officer was shocked, "because he's never come out and actually lasted that long."

What came through most strongly across the interviews, was the significance of relational continuity - and the difference it makes

when one person holds the thread through custody, release and recall. A probation officer described young people choosing to call their YJT caseworker rather than probation, "because they felt safer talking to them about what's going on." A police officer reflected that the trust between the young person and the YJT worker had supported his own work, because he did not feel he was managing the situation alone.

These accounts do not tell a different story from Malik'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 Malik. The barriers they described were not about a lack of commitment or care, but about structural conditions - fragmented services, housing shortages, rigid processes and under-resourced teams - that make it difficult to provide the consistency and stability that young people need. The challenges are systemic, and so are the solutions.



From Insight to Action

Treat custody as a disruption to development

Time in custody interrupts how young people gradually learn to live independently. While inside, daily life is structured and many responsibilities are managed for them. On release, those responsibilities return all at once, often before young people have had the opportunity to build the experience or confidence to manage them.

Support should recognise this gap more explicitly. Young people need practical preparation before release, alongside continued support afterwards to help them build routines, manage responsibilities and develop confidence over time, rather than being expected to cope immediately.

Make release feel like a supported transition, not a cliff edge

Release is often experienced as a sudden shift, where structure falls away at the same time as expectations increase. Young people are required to manage multiple demands in unfamiliar environments, often without stable foundations. Changes in support, relationships and service involvement can add to this sense of instability.

A transitional safeguarding approach would treat release as a gradual transition rather than a single event. This includes avoiding abrupt changes in support, phasing in expectations over time, maintaining continuity in relationships wherever possible, and ensuring that support does not fall away simply because a young person has crossed a legal threshold. Service involvement should be streamlined so young people are not overwhelmed by multiple systems at once. Having at least one consistent person can provide stability at a point where much else is changing.



Ensure licence conditions support, rather than undermine, stability

Evidence from this evaluation consistently shows that risk is reduced when young people have access to warm, supportive relationships. Yet licence conditions that are designed to reduce risk can sometimes restrict access to the relationships, routines and opportunities that help young people stay stable.

To ensure boundaries are appropriate and do not undermine young people's attempts to find stability on release, decision-making around licence conditions should draw more closely on the perspectives of professionals who know the young person, and where possible the young person themselves and their family. This will help ensure that the everyday impact of conditions is properly considered, including whether they are likely to limit access to support networks, and that flexibility is built in where conditions are clearly making stability harder to achieve.

Where young people are unable to return to previous networks, there needs to be a stronger focus on helping them build new connections, routines and sources of support in their current environment. Without this, young people can be left isolated, making it much harder to move forward.

Place greater weight on environment in placement decisions

The environments young people are placed in have a direct impact on how they feel, behave and engage. Not all placements provide the stability or sense of safety young people need. This is particularly important where young people have experienced trauma, or where mental health and neurodivergent needs shape how they respond to their environment.

Placement decisions should look beyond availability and give greater weight to whether environments are calm, appropriate and supportive of regulation. This includes considering how a young person's individual needs, experiences and ways of responding to the world shape what will feel manageable and safe for them. Where young people are living alongside others with similar vulnerabilities, additional support may be needed to prevent situations where stress and risk escalate rather than stabilise.

Recognise and resource the full scope of the practitioner role

Across the cases we explored for the evaluation, many of the elements that support stability -such as coordination across services, advocacy and consistent relational support - were being carried by individual practitioners, rather than consistently provided through the wider system.

In practice, this means that youth justice practitioners are often holding together fragmented systems so that young people experience something more coherent and manageable. This work is time-consuming, relationally demanding and often extends beyond what is formally recognised within service structures.

To support young people effectively, these functions need to be built into how systems are designed and resourced, rather than relying on individual practitioners to absorb them. This has implications for commissioning, caseload expectations and the support available to staff, including supervision and access to specialist input.



Conclusion

Malik's story brings together experiences from young people supported by the Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre. It shows how custody, release and recall are not experienced as separate events, but as connected parts of a longer journey shaped by development, relationships and the systems surrounding a young person.

Across the evaluation, several consistent patterns were evident. Time in custody interrupted the gradual development of independence. Release was often experienced as a cliff edge, with expectations increasing at the same time as structure and support fell away. Accommodation was frequently unstable or unsuitable, and licence conditions, while designed to reduce risk, could limit access to the relationships and support that help young people stay stable. The challenges young people faced were the result of how these factors combined.

Malik's story also shows what it takes to support a young person through this level of complexity. Nadia remained involved as his circumstances changed, helping him make sense of what was happening, navigate different systems, and stay connected as pressures began to build. Her role extended across custody, release and recall, providing a level of continuity that is often missing from the wider system. This kind of support can help stabilise situations that might otherwise unravel.

Currently, providing this level of deep, relational support often depends on individual practitioners working within systems that are not designed to provide the same continuity or flexibility. The pressures described throughout this report are structural, and they shape what is possible for both young people and the practitioners supporting them. The recommendations set out identify practical ways these conditions can be addressed, with the aim of making transitions from custody more manageable for young people and enabling the kind of support that is effective for this cohort to be delivered more consistently.

