JAMAL'S STORY



Navigating the impact of housing decisions

Youth Justice Work at New Horizon Youth Centre

NEW HORIZON YOUTH CENTRE

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Introduction

The Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre works across London with young people aged 16–25 who have involvement in the criminal justice system and are experiencing housing instability. This report explores how housing decisions and living environments shape young people's safety, stability, and ability to move forward with their lives.

Drawing on learning from a wider evaluation of youth justice practice at New Horizon Youth Centre, it examines how different types of accommodation can create very different conditions for young people, and how placements that meet formal criteria can still expose them to risk, instability, or harm in practice.

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

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

Jamal's perspective shows how living environments that feel chaotic, unsafe or isolating can affect emotional wellbeing, behaviour, and engagement with support.

The practitioner perspective shows what it takes to respond to these challenges in practice, including managing risk, maintaining relationships, and advocating within systems where suitable housing options are limited. 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.

Jamal's story

Jamal's perspective

Growing up, ***I was trying to be a man, trying to grow up too fast,*** *trying to give my mum* ***one less head to worry about. It didn't seem like nothing at the time.*** *Looking back,* ***it was just pressure and my environment.***

When I got kicked out, I thought yeah a couple of days, two three weeks away, *like usual. But deep down I knew I couldn't safely just go back to that same area and act like everything was normal. When I realised she wasn't going to have me back,*

> ***I hit rock bottom. Then I felt there was no hope. I was just stuck in this circle, just going round and round.***
> *- Jamal*

That's when New Horizon came into my life and I met Lucas. At first ***I was unsure****, because I'd had enough experiences of people saying they were going to help and then nothing happening. But Lucas was different from the start. He wasn't just another person asking questions. He was someone trying to get me somewhere safe and keep me there.*

We started with the immediate stuff. ***He had found me a hotel, he made sure I had something to eat. They were sending me vouchers just to make sure I could go through the day.*** *He's been* ***giving me not just financial support or housing support but that emotional support. I've been going through a lot of different emotions.*** *If I needed to get to an appointment, that got sorted. If I was low, that got noticed. It wasn't just help with housing in the narrow sense, it was all the things that stop you slipping through the cracks while the housing side is still dragging on. That's what made me trust him. With other services, it* ***just feels like a checklist sometimes.***

> ***That's why I appreciate New Horizon so much because it's not just a tickbox for them.*** *- Jamal*

I ended up being recalled for a few weeks. I don't really want to think about that time - prison is rough. When I was released, people kept saying it must feel good to be out. In some ways it did, but my head didn't just switch off because a door opened. ***Because I've been attacked before, my brain goes into defensive mode. But for me to be in that defensive mode, that could potentially mean I get arrested.***

The first proper place I got put in after that was shared. ***We needed the place urgently, so we just took whatever we can get*** *- but it wasn't right for me. That's the thing with housing - on paper it can look fine, but that doesn't mean it's right for you. In the place I was put,* ***the rooms are not suitable, the people in the houses are not suitable. They're mostly full of drug abusers because they're homeless as well.*** *You're living round people who are also struggling, people on the wrong path, people carrying their own issues, and all of that gets poured into one house. For someone trying to stay calm and not go backwards, that can be the worst possible fit.*

I mostly kept myself to myself. I didn't really chat to anyone. But even if you're not directly involved, you still feel the house. ***I***

see everyone else trying to argue or leave things in a mess or use my stuff. *After a while,* ***I didn't even like being around the house.*** *I was so scared that people were going to get in my face and it was all going to kick off – then I'd end up being back where I started. There were a few times it came close, definitely.* ***And the [support worker] that was assigned to me in the house, she didn't seem to care.*** *That was part of the frustration too - feeling like the person who was meant to support you either didn't understand or just didn't care. That's what those places can do - they make you feel like nobody's really seeing the whole of what's going on.*

Lucas did see it though. He could tell the place was getting to me. And he didn't just say, "hang in there," then disappear. He kept getting onto housing, kept following things up, kept trying to move things forward. At the same time, he helped make bad situations more liveable. If I was low, he'd try to break that cycle - get me to the gym, get me out for food, do something to clear my head. ***He helped me get a fridge, an air fryer, bed sheets, a little mat on the floor,*** *bits to make the place usable. That matters more than people realise. When you've got nothing, those things are the difference between just existing somewhere and being able to manage day to day.*

A big part of it was that Lucas didn't leave me on my own to figure stuff out I didn't understand. He ***will sit down, talk to me about an application, we'll do it together so I have a better understanding.*** *He helped me work out what to do, helped me with forms, helped me with PIP[2] , and made sure there was proof when things had been sent off. Sometimes it felt like he was my* ***shield****. With the council and benefits and probation and everything else on top, I needed that. Half the battle was not just the housing itself, it was all the admin and the confusion that came with it. Lucas held a lot of that with me, even though it still took longer than it should have.*

When I finally got moved into a self-contained place, the difference was immediate. ***I had my own keys. I could shower*** *properly.* ***I could wash my clothes.*** *I could buy food and know it would still be there. I could cook.* ***I wasn't on anyone's time scheme.*** *I wasn't having arguments with people in the house. I wasn't worrying about being kicked out or who was going to come through the door. It sounds basic, but that kind of peace is massive when you haven't had it for a long time.*



But then it went quiet and all the stuff I'd been carrying caught up with me. The new place was safer, but it was also lonely. There was no noise, no movement, no constant distraction. And when you've been in ***survival mode*** *for a long time, that quiet can feel heavy.*

> ***"It's like I'm at home, I'm chilling, but the PTSD is kicking in now. If I was somewhere else, I feel like I would go crazy. The fact that I'm in a safe place is what is keeping me sane right now."***
> *- Jamal*

[2] Personal Independence Payment (PIP) is a UK benefit for people with a long-term physical or mental health condition or disability, intended to help with the additional costs of daily living and mobility.

Lucas stuck around, he was still there with me. He kept helping me find things to focus on, kept helping me with appointments and paperwork, kept helping me think about work and what came next. ***So now I've got a base, I can slowly start functioning like a normal person, like a functional person that just goes to work and does activities.*** *Having somewhere good to live is the anchor of everything. Without it, everything else falls over. With it, you've at least got something to build from.*

That's where I'm now. It's still a process. But I've got more hope than I had before. I can think about routine. I can think about legit work. I can think about not going back. And honestly, Lucas is a big reason for that. When someone is ***making sure you've got somewhere to sleep at night, making sure you have something to eat, checking up on you, seeing if you're ok, seeing how you've been. When someone's helping you, you want to do better.*** *It gives you a base. And when you've got a base, that's when change actually starts.*



Lucas's perspective

I first met Jamal after his mum had kicked him out, before the recall.

At the time, we were trying to sort temporary accommodation for him and keep him safe. Things were already unstable, and then he was recalled to custody right in the middle of everything.

We don't stop working with young people when they move into custody, but of course the work has to shift. I visited him while he was inside, which I think made a big difference. He didn't have many visitors, so keeping that contact mattered. Some of the work we did at that time was practical - keeping housing conversations alive, filling in paperwork, trying to make sure things would be in place for his release. Some of it was just about staying connected. Jamal doesn't trust quickly. He watches people first. So the fact that he kept engaging with me mattered.

By the time he was due for release, we knew each other pretty well. That's why I had concerns about the shared accommodation from the start. On paper it ticked the necessary boxes, but I knew how Jamal manages stress. I knew how important routine and control are for him. And I knew he had a temper. Totally understandable given what he'd been through – but it didn't take that much for him to snap. He knew that too. I also knew he wouldn't complain unless things felt really bad, which was probably going to be too late.

When he told me it was fine, I didn't really believe him. But there wasn't anything I could do at that stage other than help him manage as best I could. I'd tried my best to make the case for self-contained when he was coming out, but it's hard to get it taken seriously enough, especially when they're so little available housing anyway. So instead I had to focus on trying to prepare him as best I could, give him some ways to cope. But it was hard knowing he was going to struggle

before he even moved in.

It didn't take long before I could see the strain in Jamal. He was keeping himself to himself more and more, spending time in his room, and talking about the house in a way that wasn't just irritation - it was anxiety. The mess, the arguments, people using each other's stuff, the tension in the air - all of that was really getting to him. For Jamal, that kind of environment kept him in a constant state of alertness, which was so stressful for him.

I helped with practical things to make it more manageable. I got him an air fryer, a fridge, bed sheets - bits to make the room more usable and help him get through day to day. It wasn't part of any formal plan. It was just about removing some of the daily stress where I could. When someone has very little, those practical things can make a real difference.

What worried me most was how much the placement was feeding his hypervigilance. Staff might see a young person as aggressive or difficult, but from my perspective Jamal was operating at a constant level of self-protection. He was watching everything, second-guessing people, and trying to manage an environment that didn't feel safe or suitable for him.

I escalated my concerns about the suitability of the placement and kept pushing housing to reconsider. I was following things up and trying to move things forward, but progress was slow. Often it takes longer than it should, even when it's clear a placement is not right.

Alongside that, I was trying to support Jamal with everything around the housing as well. I helped with forms, applications, that sort of thing. He has an ADHD diagnosis, so he has a case for PIP, but that's being slow too – lots of evidence gathering, as usual.

When Jamal finally moved into a self-contained flat, the difference was obvious. He had his own keys, his own space, somewhere he could cook, wash, and keep his belongings without worrying about other people. The visible conflict stopped. There was more peace straight away.

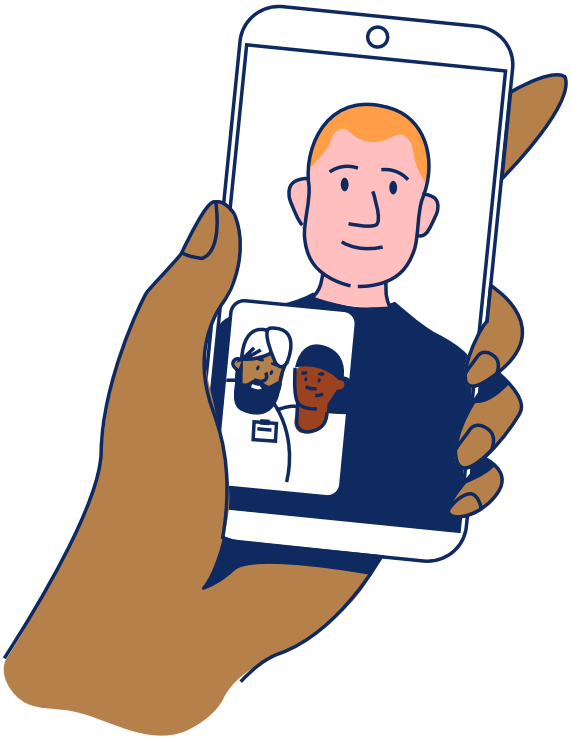
But I wasn't relaxed. The flat was safer, but it was also quieter and more isolated. He was away from the noise and tension of the shared house, but also away from the networks and familiarity he was used to. Some of those connections weren't good for him, but they were what he knew. They were still connections and gave him somewhere to belong, people to be known by. In the flat, he was safer, but he was also more alone.

Isolation is less visible than conflict, but it carries its own risks. He began spending long periods indoors – mainly on his phone, I think. And without structure the days could lose shape quite quickly. For someone



recently released, unstructured time can quietly reconnect them to the same patterns you've been trying to create distance from. If it's hard being where you are, it feels even easier to go back, if you know what I mean.

At that stage, the work I did with Jamal changed. Less managing the immediate stress of the placement, more helping him build routine. I made a deliberate decision not to reduce contact after the move. On paper, he was housed and more stable. In reality, it felt like quite a fragile stage. I kept helping him with appointments and paperwork, checking in, and trying to support him to think about work and what came next.



There were days he didn't answer my calls. Days I wondered whether momentum was slipping. But because we'd built the relationship before the recall, through custody, and into release, I felt able to stay steady rather than react. I think that consistency helped things settle over time.

There's another part of this that doesn't always get talked about – the fact that making time for this part of the work is really hard, and we often can't do it in the way we want to.

When Jamal moved into the flat, the visible crisis had passed. Resettlement doesn't shout for attention in the same way. It's quieter. But it's just as important. But from a workload point of view, that's often when attention shifts elsewhere. There's always someone about to lose accommodation, someone in court, someone in immediate danger who needs help.

There were weeks where my diary was already full and I was moving from one urgent situation to the next. I remember thinking, if I pull back too quickly here, we could undo months of work. So I made space where I could. That sometimes meant checking in when the day was technically done. Or staying longer because he'd finally opened up about something important.

You get used to carrying that extra weight. The sense that if you don't hold it, no one else will. Over time, that adds up.

> ***It's not one dramatic moment. It's the steady build-up - the constant mental list of who's fragile, who's close to slipping, who needs a bit more from you than the job really allows.*** *- Lucas*

Everyone in this role cares a lot. That's why they do it. But if the only way to give someone consistent support is to stretch yourself week after week, eventually you start to feel it. People get tired. They move on. And the kind of continuity that makes the difference becomes even harder to protect.

With Jamal, staying steady mattered. I'm glad I was able to do it. But that level of consistency shouldn't hinge on individual workers stretching themselves to make it possible.

From Experience to Insight

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

Housing suitability is more complex than formal criteria suggest

Jamal's experience highlights how housing decisions that appear appropriate on paper can, in practice, undermine young people's safety and stability.

When he was first released, the accommodation he moved into met the formal criteria required at that stage. It provided a roof over his head at a point of immediate need. However, as both Jamal and Lucas describe, the reality of living there was very different. The environment itself created stress and unease, making it difficult for him to feel settled or safe.

For Jamal, this was not simply a matter of preference. His response to the environment was shaped by his wider experiences, including exposure to violence and a heightened sense of threat. He describes constantly watching people, second-guessing situations and trying to avoid conflict. In this context, the conditions he was living in kept him in a state of ongoing alertness, rather than allowing him to begin stabilising.

Across the cases we reviewed, this pattern was common. Decisions about accommodation were often driven by availability, cost and eligibility criteria, rather than a detailed assessment of what a placement would feel like for the young person living there. While formal assessments may take account of risk in a general sense, they do not always capture how trauma, neurodiversity, mental health needs and past experiences of violence shape an individual's response to their environment.

Practitioners described spending significant time trying to communicate this wider context to housing providers, reframing behaviour and explaining why a placement that meets basic criteria may still be unsuitable. In some cases, this involved escalating concerns or seeking legal advice where decisions did not reflect young people's entitlements. However, progress was often slow, particularly in a context of limited housing supply.

Jamal's experience shows that suitability cannot be understood through formal criteria alone. What matters is how a placement feels to the young person living in it, and how it interacts with the ways they have learned to stay safe. Where this is not taken into account, accommodation can become another source of instability, increasing stress and heightening risk, rather than providing a foundation for change.

Shared accommodation is unsuitable for this cohort

Shared accommodation played a central role in shaping Jamal's experience after release, placing him in an environment that was fundamentally misaligned with what he needed to feel safe and stable.

After his release, he moved into a shared placement as an immediate solution. As he describes, he largely kept himself to himself, avoiding interaction where possible. Even so, the shared nature of the environment meant he could not avoid its impact. "You still feel the house," he explains. The noise, the tension, people using each other's belongings, and the unpredictability of others' behaviour, created a constant sense of unease. Over time, this made it increasingly difficult for him to spend time in the space at all.

For Jamal, the shared environment interacted directly with the heightened sense of threat he had developed as a result of his past experiences. Living alongside others who were also dealing with trauma, stress or volatility meant that he was constantly exposed to situations he could not control. In this context, shared living kept him in a state of ongoing vigilance. As Jamal reflects, rather than reducing risk, the environment amplified it, increasing the likelihood of conflict and drawing him back towards patterns he was trying to avoid.

Across the cases we reviewed, this pattern was common. Shared accommodation frequently brought together young people with similar experiences of instability, trauma and offending behaviour. While these placements are often intended as a stepping stone for young people, in practice they can concentrate risk. Practitioners described how heightened vigilance, sensitivity to noise and difficulty regulating emotions can be intensified in these environments, particularly for young people with neurodivergent needs or unresolved trauma. In effect, shared accommodation can bring together young people who are all managing heightened stress, without providing the conditions needed to regulate or stabilise it.

Despite this, access to self-contained accommodation is often restricted by structural factors, including benefit rules such as the Shared Accommodation Rate[3], which limits housing options for most single people under 35. In practice, this significantly narrows what young people can afford, often leaving shared accommodation as the only viable option, regardless of suitability. While exemptions exist, these are typically defined through narrow categories and do not always reflect the realities of young people's lives. In particular, young people experiencing ongoing community or peer violence may not be recognised within exemption criteria. In a context of limited housing supply, this results in young people with complex needs being placed in shared accommodation by default, even where these environments are known to increase stress, heighten vigilance and elevate the risk of conflict or recall.

Accommodation that is far from support networks creates new risks

Jamal's move into self-contained accommodation marked a clear shift in his situation. For the first time, he had his own space, somewhere he could cook, wash, and keep his belongings safe. The immediate pressures of the shared house fell away, and with them the constant tension and risk of conflict.

But as Jamal describes, this change also brought a different kind of challenge. The new flat was quieter, more stable, and physically safer, but it was also isolating. "It went quiet," he explains, and in that quiet, much of what he had been holding began to surface. After a long period of living in survival mode, the absence of noise and distraction did not immediately feel like relief. Instead, it created space for difficult thoughts and emotions to emerge.



[3] The Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) is the maximum amount of Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit that most single people under 35 can receive. It is based on the cost of renting a room in a shared property rather than a self-contained home.

For Jamal, this was compounded by distance from familiar networks. While some of those relationships carried risk, they also provided a sense of connection and belonging. Moving away reduced his exposure to immediate harm, but it also removed the informal support structures he was used to. In this sense, the move did not remove risk so much as change its nature.

Across the cases we reviewed, this pattern was common. Young people were often placed in accommodation away from their home areas in order to reduce exposure to violence or exploitation. While this could be protective in the short term, it also introduced new challenges. Many young people struggled to build routines, access support, or establish new relationships in unfamiliar environments, particularly where they were already dealing with trauma, neurodiversity and associated mental health needs. This was especially pronounced for those whose development had been interrupted by custody or prolonged instability. Living independently requires a set of practical and emotional skills that are typically developed over time. When young people are expected to manage this transition in isolation, without familiar support networks, the demands can feel overwhelming.

Practitioners described how long periods of unstructured time could quickly become difficult to manage in these circumstances. Without meaningful activity, connection or routine, young people could become increasingly withdrawn, spending extended periods alone and struggling to regulate their thoughts and emotions. In this context, returning to previous networks or ways of life could begin to feel more manageable than remaining isolated, even where those environments carried known risks.

Jamal's experience shows how accommodation that appears safer in physical terms can still be difficult to sustain without the relational and structural support needed to make it work. Where isolation is not actively addressed, it can create a different pathway back into instability, shaped not by immediate threat, but by disconnection and the absence of support.

Poor quality housing can undermine wellbeing and motivation

Jamal's experience also highlights how the quality of a housing environment can affect not just how young people live day to day, but how they feel about themselves and their ability to move forward.

When he was living in shared accommodation, the challenges were not only about who he was living with, but also about the condition of the space itself. The lack of privacy, upkeep of shared areas, and general sense that the environment was not being looked after, all contributed to his ongoing feelings of discomfort and insecurity.

Problems of this kind were not unique to Jamal's situation. Across cases, young people and their caseworkers described broken or missing facilities, limited access to cooking or washing, and environments that were often poorly maintained. While these issues might be seen as minor in isolation, their cumulative effect was significant. They created daily stress and made it harder to establish routine, undermining young people's efforts to move forward.

For many young people, the condition of their accommodation also carried meaning. Environments that were poorly maintained could affect their sense of dignity and self-worth, particularly when they were being encouraged to make positive changes in other areas of their lives. Being asked to rebuild while living in a space that did not feel safe, comfortable or cared for could feel contradictory, and at times undermined motivation to engage with support.

In this context, practical interventions took on added importance. As Jamal describes, items such as a fridge, an air fryer, and basic

furnishings made a tangible difference to how manageable his space felt. These were relatively small additions, but they helped shift the experience from simply having somewhere to stay to being able to function day to day. Practitioners often described this kind of support as essential, even though it sits outside what is typically recognised as being part of formal housing provision.

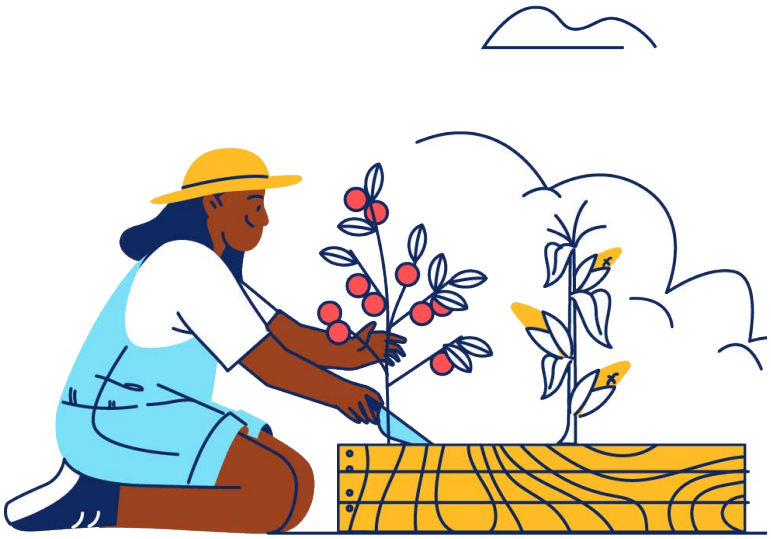
Stability allows identity, strengths and future plans to emerge

After moving into self-contained accommodation, Jamal describes a shift from simply getting through each day to being able to think about his future. Having his own space gave him a sense of control and predictability that had been largely absent until that point. With fewer immediate pressures and less need to stay constantly on guard, he was able to begin focusing on things beyond day-to-day survival.

This shift was not immediate. The quiet of his new accommodation brought its own challenges, and there were periods where he struggled with being disconnected from his networks and the weight of what he had been carrying. Jamal captures the psychological shift vividly: “when you’ve been in survival mode for a long time, that quiet can feel heavy. It’s like I’m at home, I’m chilling, but the PTSD is kicking in now.” Reflecting the perspective of several practitioners, Lucas didn’t see this as a setback, but as a new stage of work that required a different kind of presence and skill.

With this support, however, the stability of Jamal’s environment created a foundation from which he could start thinking about things differently. This included starting to think about routine, work and the possibility of building a life that did not revolve around crisis or offending.

This pattern was observed across the evaluation. When young people were no longer in environments that required



constant vigilance, their strengths and personalities often became more visible. Practitioners described seeing qualities such as humour, empathy and strong leadership skills emerge over time, alongside a growing willingness to engage with support, education or employment opportunities.

Motivation and self-belief did not appear suddenly, but developed gradually as young people experienced a sense of safety and continuity. Where stability was sustained, it created space for young people to build confidence, establish routines and begin to make choices that supported longer-term change.

Unsuitable housing reinforces cycles of instability and offending

For young people to move forward, their accommodation needs to support a shift away from familiar environments and ways of living, while making a different kind of life feel possible and worth moving towards.

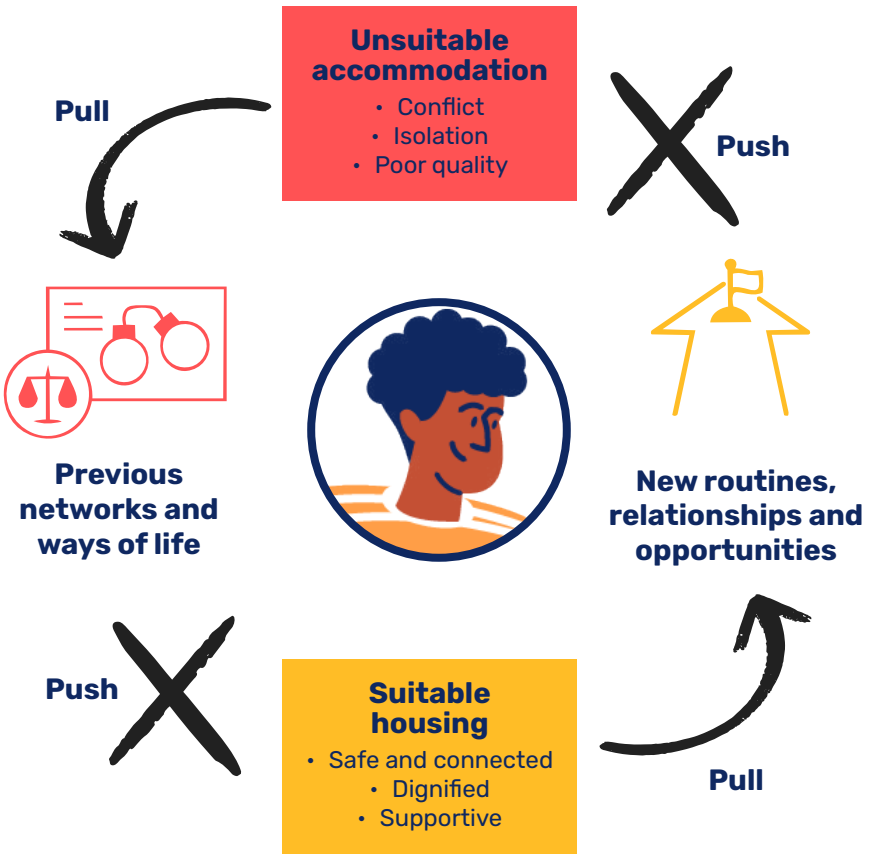
Jamal’s experience shows how difficult this can be when those conditions are not in place. His shared accommodation felt volatile and poorly maintained, meaning it was not somewhere he wanted to spend time. When he later moved into self-contained accommodation, he felt isolated and alone,

leaving him equally unhappy, albeit in a different way. Throughout this, the pull of more familiar environments and relationships remained strong, even where these carried risk.

Across the cases we reviewed, this tension was common. Moving forward required young people not only to reduce their connection to previous networks, but to build a sense of belonging somewhere new. This meant having accommodation that felt safe, predictable and of good quality, located somewhere they could begin to establish new routines and relationships, without being exposed to immediate harm. It also meant access to active, sustained support like Lucas' - help to build a life in a new place. This includes help with navigating unfamiliar areas, establishing routines, and beginning to form new, positive connections. Without that kind of intentional resettlement support alongside the move itself, there is a strong risk that even good-quality housing will lead to isolation and reinforce cycles of harm.

Where these conditions were in place, accommodation could begin to act as an anchor. Young people were more likely to spend time in their space, take pride in it, and engage with the opportunities and support around them. Where they were not, the opposite often happened. Accommodation that felt unsafe, of poor quality or isolating pushed young people away from the very environments intended to support them. In these circumstances, familiar places and relationships could begin to feel more manageable by comparison, even where they involved known risks. Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic.

Figure 1: How housing influences young people's trajectories



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 2 and comprises six interconnected functions that together describe the team's work with young people.

Figure 2: The role of the Youth Justice Team



The following section applies this model to the context of our case study, drawing on Jamal's account and Lucas's reflections to illustrate how these functions operate in practice. It explores how practitioners support young people to navigate housing decisions and respond to the impact that different accommodation environments can have on their safety and 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.

In Jamal's case, this involved responding to how risk changed across different housing environments, and adjusting support accordingly. When he was living in shared accommodation, Lucas paid close attention to how Jamal described the environment and how he was responding to it. Rather than taking the placement at face value, he recognised the impact it was having on his sense of safety and the potential for situations to escalate. This led him to advocate for Jamal to be moved, whilst he supported him to manage the immediate risks in the meantime.

When Jamal later moved into self-contained accommodation, Lucas's focus shifted. While the risks associated with conflict reduced, he recognised that isolation and lack of structure presented a different set of challenges. His support at this stage involved staying closely involved, helping Jamal establish routines, and identifying ways to reduce the likelihood of disengagement or a return to previous environments. Practitioners described working with young people as they moved between placements as working with different forms of risk over time, rather than expecting risk to be removed entirely when accommodation changed.

This kind of work involves making decisions between options that all carry some level of risk, and judging which is the least harmful for that particular young person. It also involves continually updating assessments as circumstances change. In Jamal's case, shifts in accommodation, changes in how he was spending his time, and new information about how he was coping all



shaped how risk was understood. Lucas drew on conversations with Jamal, alongside information from other services, to build a fuller picture of what was happening and adjust his approach accordingly.

Another important part of the role involves communicating these risks 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 Jamal's case, this included making it clear how both unsafe shared environments and isolation in self-contained accommodation could affect his ability to remain stable.

Jamal's story shows how quickly the conditions around a young person can shift, and the implications this has for their safety. Responding to this requires a contextual approach to safeguarding – one in which risk is understood not only in relation to the young person themselves, but in relation to the environments, relationships and conditions around them. 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 Jamal's situation sat outside the control of the Youth Justice Team. Housing shortages, shared accommodation rules and limited suitable options all influenced decisions about the environments he was placed in. 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.

Lucas's approach involved responding to these decisions in different ways. Where risks were high, he used advocacy to push for change, while supporting Jamal to manage the impact of a placement that was not suited to his needs. When he secured more suitable accommodation for Jamal, this represented a clear improvement, but also introduced new challenges. In this context, Lucas's role shifted. Rather than advocating for improvements to his accommodation, he became focused on helping Jamal build a sense of stability and connection in his environment – one that, whilst much improved, remained far from perfect. In this way, Lucas's work involved continually adapting his support in response to the conditions created by what the system was able to provide.

In practice, throughout Jamal's journey, Lucas's work involved a significant amount of ongoing coordination and follow-up. Lucas maintained regular contact with housing services, shared information about how the placements were affecting Jamal, and continued to push for adjustments where possible. At the same time, he stayed closely involved, helping Jamal manage the day-to-day realities of each placement and adapt as circumstances changed.

Another important part of the role involved making these pressures visible to other agencies. The professionals involved in decisions about Jamal's housing did not have an ongoing relationship with him and were not directly exposed to the day-to-day impact of the environments he was living in. Lucas therefore played a role in communicating how both unsafe shared accommodation and isolation in self-contained housing were affecting his ability to remain stable and move forward.

Jamal'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 managing the impact of decisions made elsewhere, often with limited control over the outcomes.

Maintaining continuity across transitions

Jamal's experience involved multiple transitions, both in where he was living and in the conditions surrounding his support. Uncertainty around where he was living, alongside limited transparency about how decisions were made, meant that his situation could change quickly, often without much time for preparation.

During these periods, Lucas remained a consistent presence. This meant that while the environments around Jamal changed, there was continuity in both the relationship and how support was offered. Alongside responding to immediate issues, Lucas supported Jamal to make sense of what was happening and to prepare for changes as they arose, helping him understand decisions, think through how different environments might affect him, and identify what he needed from future placements.

Across the cases we reviewed, the transitions young people experienced – changes in accommodation, moves in and out of custody, reaching age-related thresholds – were often accompanied by changes in their wider network of support. At these points, different services became involved, others stepped back, and new professionals entered the picture, each bringing their own expectations, priorities and ways of working. From a young person's perspective, this could mean having to re-explain their situation, rebuild trust, and adjust to new relationships at the same time as managing the transition itself. Practitioners described how consistent support from a trusted professional can help reduce the impact of this. Rather than having to start again each time something changed, it enables young people to hold onto a sense of ongoing connection at times when much else feels uncertain.

In practice, maintaining this continuity is not always straightforward. Transitions can involve young people being placed far from their local area, increasing distance from familiar people, services and support networks. In these situations, continuity can become even more important, as the risk of isolation is greater. However, staying involved when young people are far way often requires significantly more time and resource. Visiting a young person who has been placed miles away can take hours, reducing the time available for other cases and placing additional pressure on practitioners to balance competing demands.



Supporting young people to navigate complex systems

Jamal's experience involved navigating housing processes within a wider system of support that was not always easy to follow. These processes often involved different agencies, each with their own requirements, thresholds and ways of working. From his perspective, it was not always clear how decisions were being made or what needed to happen for things to move forward. More broadly, practitioners consistently described systems that were complex, fragmented and difficult for young people to navigate alone. Processes often involved multiple professionals, repeated requests for information and limited communication between services. For young people, this could mean having to explain their situation multiple times, while trying to understand expectations that were not always clearly communicated.

In Jamal's case, Lucas played a key role in helping Jamal navigate the processes he encountered. This involved explaining what was happening, helping him understand what different services were asking for, and keeping track of next steps. Given the complexity of the systems involved, and the pressures Jamal was experiencing, this often meant taking an active role in moving things forward on his behalf. This included following up with services, requesting changes to placements, and advocating for accommodation that better reflected his needs.



Across the cases we reviewed, practitioners described how supporting young people to navigate systems often involved a balance between doing things with them and, at times, doing things for them. While building understanding and confidence was an important part of the role, there were also points where young people did not have the capacity to engage with complex processes directly. In these situations, without more active support, young people may find themselves waiting without clarity, missing key steps, or disengaging altogether. In contrast, where practitioners provided consistent guidance and, where needed, stepped in to progress things, processes that might otherwise feel overwhelming became more manageable.

Jamal's story highlights how support to navigate systems involves careful support through processes that can otherwise feel confusing or overwhelming. In this way, practitioners play a critical role in ensuring that young people receive, and are able to engage with, the support that they are entitled to.

Embedding lived context in decision-making

Jamal's experience highlights the importance of ensuring that decisions about young people's accommodation take account of their wider circumstances. The decisions that led to his first placement relied on formal assessments and recorded information. As these did not fully capture the context of his situation, including the environments he could safely return to and the factors affecting how he responded to different placements, he was placed somewhere where he was at high risk of harm. More broadly, housing and safeguarding systems rely heavily on documentation and categorisation, with decisions often shaped by what is recorded in assessments, referrals or case notes. Practitioners described how important nuance can be lost when complex lives are reduced to what is written on paper.

Lucas played a key role in ensuring that Jamal's situation was more fully understood within these processes. This involved advocating for him in discussions with housing services, explaining why different environments would or would not work, and bringing in context that was not always visible in written records.

Across the cases we reviewed, this "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 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 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 Jamal'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 requests take



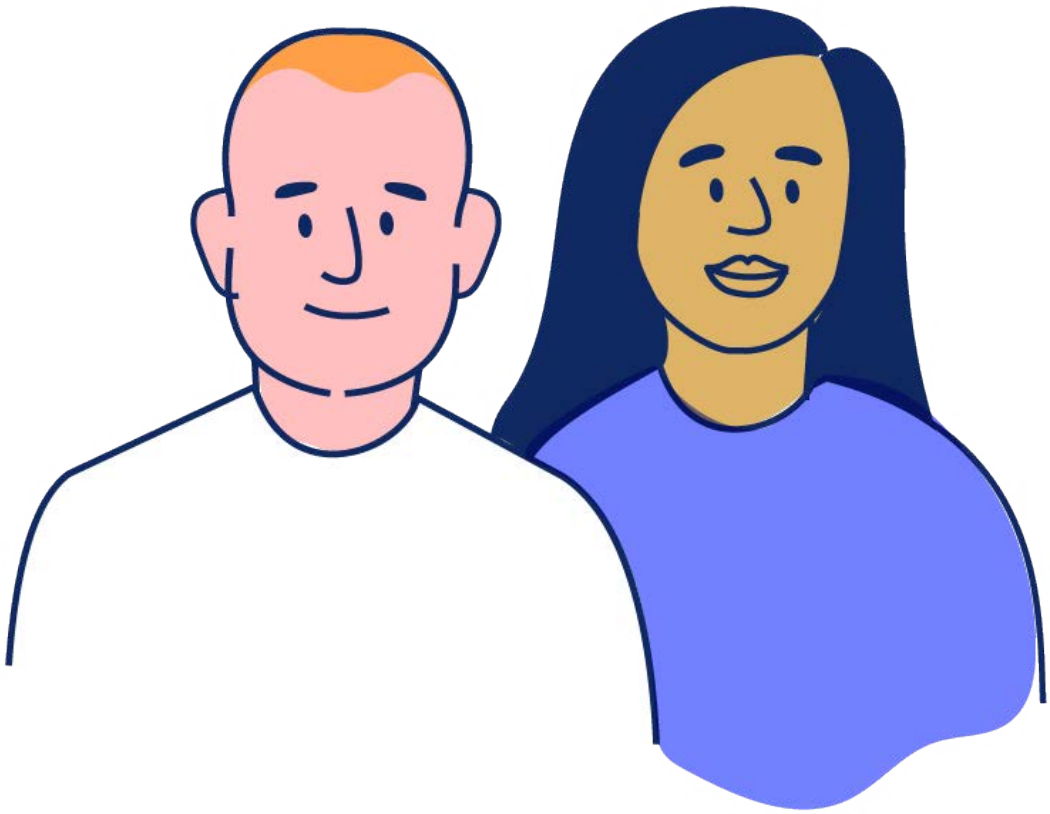
up a considerable proportion of practitioners' time. All of this sits alongside their direct work with young people.

Not only are practitioners dealing with high volumes of work, but the nature of that work is often emotionally demanding. Challenging decisions, advocating for more suitable placements and pushing for progress requires persistence, particularly where systems are slow to respond or apply narrow criteria. The practitioners we spoke to consistently 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.

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. Young people may at times experience high levels of anxiety, distress or trauma, particularly when they are living in unstable or unsuitable accommodation. 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. 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 explored in Jamal's story – the complexity of housing decisions, the unsuitability of shared housing, the importance of housing quality - were echoed consistently by stakeholders we spoke to throughout the wider evaluation. What emerged from these accounts was a picture of a housing system in which the conditions shaping young people's journeys widely understood, yet difficult to establish within structural limitations.

The gap between what is formally considered "suitable" and what actually supports a young person to stay safe was a consistently described pattern. Professionals across different roles gave examples of young people being given housing that met formal requirements but failed to meet their wider needs. One former social worker described how she would apologise to young people for the accommodation they were put in: "*I wouldn't put my own child here. I'm so sorry that I have to leave you here.*" This kind of reflection pointed to a deeper moral tension for professionals, who were often required to implement decisions they did not feel were in young people's best interests. Another professional working in a Youth Violence Team at a local authority emphasised that housing needs to be "*individual to that young person*," taking into account "*that child or young person's perspective around what they feel is important to them to make them feel safe.*"



When it came to shared accommodation specifically, stakeholders described a set of dynamics that closely mirrored Jamal's experience. A practitioner supporting young people leaving prison at a charity partner organisation described how asking young people coming out of prison to share with others "*essentially feels a bit institutionalised. The same as the prison.*" A youth worker from a partner Vanguard project described local authorities concentrating released prisoners in the same building as "*putting all the vulnerable people in the same place.*" A practitioner at a charity partner organisation explained that "*a lot of our young people do suffer from PTSD and mistrust in people, so living in a shared accommodation is never ideal*." Most powerfully, a probation officer described a case where a young person was placed in shared accommodation despite clear professional advice, only to be subsequently recalled. "*[New Horizon and the Vanguard team] have always expressed that he can't share with anyone. And then the council put him somewhere where he had a shared facility and that sort of triggered [his recall]*." This is precisely the dynamic Jamal experienced - being placed in an environment that professionals knew carried risk, with consequences that were both predictable and preventable.

The tension between safety and isolation, which shaped Jamal's experience after moving into his own flat, was also widely recognised. A stakeholder working for a Serious Violence Team at a local authority described how "*when you move them individually, there is a greater risk of them coming back because there is that feeling*

of isolation." When discussing how this can result in pulls to home networks, another practitioner at a charity partner organisation reflected: "*We see risk, they see community.*"

Across stakeholder accounts, the importance of sustained, relationship-based advocacy was clear. There was also considerable praise for the formidable approach of YJT practitioners. One probation officer described the team as "*relentless on councils*", providing a level of persistence that her own caseload would not allow. A police officer recalled housing services refusing to act until YJT practitioners intervened: "*Housing just dug their heels in…then I had [New Horizon] in these meetings going, no, that's not what you can do, there's a lot of other options there*" and everything changed.

What also came through was the cost of this work. One psychologist, who had experience of working in similar ways to the YJT, observed: "*Frontline work like this is so hard. Lots of the people who do it have their own lived experience. It burns you out really fast. And they're a team who are really passionate and work really hard. And I think, how we sustain people in that work is a really important question.*"

These accounts do not tell a different story from Jamal's. They confirm that the dynamics shaping his experience are recognised by professionals across the system. The barriers they described were not about a lack of commitment or care, but about structural conditions that make it difficult to provide the consistency and safety young people need. The challenges are systemic, and so are the solutions.



From Insight to Action

The recommendations below are directed at the wider systems and services involved in supporting young people to access and sustain suitable accommodation. They are grounded in the learning from Jamal's story, alongside wider insights from the evaluation, and reflect the conditions required for placements to be safe, stable and workable in practice.

Take a whole-person approach to housing decisions

Jamal's case illustrates how decisions about accommodation can be shaped by narrow interpretations of risk or need, rather than a fuller understanding of a young person's experiences and circumstances.

We recommend that decisions are not based solely on written assessments or thresholds. Instead, decisions should be based on a wider range of factors, including experience of trauma, mental health needs, neurodiversity and neurodevelopment, and formal and informal support networks. This 'whole-peron' approach will help agencies better understand what will make the situation feel safe and manageable for each individual.

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 professionals 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.

Do not use shared accommodation for this cohort

Across the cases we reviewed, there was consistent evidence that shared accommodation is unsuitable for young people in this cohort. Many described these environments as chaotic, unsafe or emotionally destabilising, particularly when living alongside others experiencing crisis. For young people navigating violence-related risk and trauma, these conditions can undermine emotional regulation and increase the likelihood of conflict, disengagement or further system involvement.

We recommend that shared accommodation is not used for young people with these levels of need. This involves:

- **recognising the consistent association between shared environments and instability, distress and increased risk;**

- **reviewing the constraints created by Shared Accommodation Rate rules for under-35s, which restrict access to more suitable housing; and**

- **ensuring that decisions about placement take account of who young people are living alongside and how the environment functions in practice.**

Expanding access to self-contained accommodation for this cohort is likely to significantly improve young people's ability to stabilise and sustain progress.

On rare occasions where shared accommodation must be used, placements should be supported by dynamic risk assessments that are regularly reviewed, so that emerging challenges can be identified and addressed before they escalate into crisis.

Strengthen how risk is assessed in housing decisions

Jamal's experience shows that different accommodation placements carry different forms of risk, and that these are not always fully recognised in decision-making.

While assessments often focus on immediate physical safety, less visible risks, particularly those linked to isolation, emotional strain and how a placement is experienced day to day, can be overlooked.

We recommend that risk assessment processes take a broader and more contextual approach. This should include explicit consideration of how placements are likely to be experienced over time by each young person, including the impact of disconnection from support networks, the emotional demands of different environments, and the young person's capacity to manage these.

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



Intentionally design accommodation to support belonging and progress

Jamal's experience highlights how accommodation can play a central role in shaping whether young people move forward or return to previous environments.

Across the cases, there was consistent evidence of a "push–pull" dynamic, where, unless new environments provide a comfortable and meaningful alternative, young people may be pulled back towards previous networks that feel familiar - even when this comes with significant risk.

We recommend that accommodation for this cohort is intentionally designed to support a sense of belonging and forward momentum. This includes:

- **creating high-quality environments that young people can settle into, rather than endure;**

- **ensuring accommodation is located in areas where young people can build new connections, access support, and establish a new sense of place; and**

- **resourcing support that helps young people build connections, routines and a sense of purpose.**

Without this, there is a risk that new placements fail to take hold, increasing the likelihood that young people disengage or return to unsafe situations.

Provide consistent relational support through transitions

Jamal's experience highlights the importance of consistent, trusted relationships during periods of transition. As his living situation changed, the support he needed also shifted, particularly as he navigated uncertainty, adapted to new environments and managed the impact of placements that did not always feel safe or workable.

We recommend that systems place greater emphasis on maintaining consistent relational support during these periods, including when young people 'age out' of services. This includes:

- **ensuring that young people have a named and consistent practitioner who remains involved as circumstances change, avoiding abrupt endings or "cliff-edges" in support as thresholds are reached or services step back;**

- **recognising transitions as points of heightened risk and potential disruption, and planning proactively for these moments rather than responding once difficulties emerge;**

- **ensuring that support can end in a gradual and planned way, rather than at fixed thresholds, allowing relationships to taper in line with young people's readiness rather than stopping abruptly; and**

- **resourcing the work required to maintain relationships through transitions, particularly where young people are placed away from their local area, recognising the additional time this takes and the impact on both practitioners and the other young people they are supporting.**

Recognise and resource the work required to support this cohort

Jamal's case highlights how much work sits behind identifying, securing and maintaining suitable accommodation. This includes coordination across services, sustained advocacy, and ongoing relational support.

We recommend that systems, including commissioning and tendering processes, are designed to better support this work, rather than relying on individual practitioners to absorb its demands. This means:

- **recognising the time required to build and sustain relationships, the complexity of system-facing advocacy, and the need for flexibility in how outcomes are defined and measured;**

- **ensuring caseloads reflect the time required for this work;**

- **providing space for reflective practice and supervision, so staff can process the emotional demands they are managing day to day.**

Without this, practitioners are left carrying sustained pressure, increasing the risk of burnout and turnover, and undermining the continuity that is critical to young people's progress.



Conclusion

Jamal's story brings together experiences from young people supported by the Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre. It shows the significant impact of housing decisions on young people's ability to stay safe, stabilise and move forward with their lives.

Across the evaluation, several consistent patterns were evident. Accommodation that met formal criteria did not always provide environments that felt safe, manageable or sustainable in practice. Shared housing frequently exposed young people to heightened stress, conflict and instability, often undermining their ability to stabilise. In contrast to this, whilst self-contained accommodation provided a safer and more appropriate foundation, it did not, on its own, guarantee stability.

Without the right relational and practical support in place, young people could experience isolation and disconnection, making it harder to sustain progress over time. The quality and location of housing, alongside the support available to young people, all played a critical role in determining whether placements enabled progress.

Jamal's story also shows what it takes to support a young person through these conditions. Lucas remained closely involved throughout, responding to changing forms of risk, advocating across systems, and maintaining continuity during periods of transition. His role extended beyond securing accommodation itself, helping Jamal manage the impact of different environments and supporting him to begin building stability once a safer placement was secured.

Currently, providing this level of consistent, relational and system-facing support depends on individual practitioners working within systems that are not designed to sustain it. The challenges described throughout this report are structural, shaping both the environments young people are placed in and the support available to them once there. The recommendations set out identify practical ways these conditions can be addressed, with the aim of ensuring that accommodation not only meets formal requirements, but provides a stable and workable foundation for young people to move forward.

