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AARON'S STORY



Supporting young people to access accommodation

Youth Justice Work at New Horizon Youth Centre

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NEW HORIZON YOUTH CENTRE

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Introduction

The Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre works across London with young people aged 16–25 who have involvement in the criminal justice system and are experiencing housing instability. This report explores what it can mean for these young people as they navigate multiple systems in attempt to secure safe accommodation.

Drawing on learning from a wider evaluation of youth justice practice at New Horizon Youth Centre[1], it examines how young people experience housing systems at points of acute vulnerability, when stability is critical but access to accommodation can be uncertain and complex.

Aaron's story is a composite case study, co-developed with young people and practitioners. It draws on recurring themes from the experiences of young people supported by the Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre. Many had histories shaped by overlapping challenges, including care experience, exposure to violence, unstable housing, and a range of unmet needs, particularly around mental health and neurodivergence.

The case includes both a young person's narrative and a corresponding practitioner perspective, offering insight into how housing processes are experienced and navigated from both sides. Aaron's perspective shows how access to accommodation is shaped not only by formal eligibility, but by the practical realities of navigating housing systems, evidencing need, and managing delays between agencies. The practitioner perspective shows what it takes to support young people through this process in practice, including sustained advocacy, coordination across services, and maintaining involvement through periods of uncertainty. 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.

Aaron's story

Aaron's perspective

I've had a tough upbringing, my mum went through domestic violence when I was a proper little kid, I remember it all. My family wasn't really the cleanest family, you know. I'm a product of my environment, there was only one way I was going.

When I first met New Horizon, I think I was 17. I got stabbed a couple times, so I was in urgent care. *In the hospital, someone who came to see me and they said they were going to refer me to New Horizon because of my situation.* ***I was homeless and I couldn't stay at my mum's, because that's where I got stabbed.***

At first, my worker, Debbie, was ***helping me out with homeless applications, just trying to fast forward everything for me to make sure I had a permanent place to be at.*** *Whilst we were waiting for housing, Debbie sorted out a hotel for me as soon as I came out of hospital, so I wasn't stuck on the streets.* ***I was kind of happy about that. I thought something was actually happening. But quickly and shortly I realised that that's not how the housing thing works. It takes a long time.***



The whole time though, Debbie was there. ***She was persistent, she kept asking housing for updates.*** *And she was* ***continuously booking hotels for me to stay in until we sorted my housing. So at least they were keeping me off the streets and in a safer area.***

But staying in a hotel for a long time is hard.

> ***In a hotel, you just feel bare secluded. You don't know anyone, you don't even wanna go eat. Living in a hotel isn't stable, it's depressing.*** *- Aaron*

You can't cook your own food. You haven't got your own fridge. You can't do your own washing. ***Not going to lie, I felt like I was in jail.*** *So I was safer than before* ***because no one knew where I was.*** *But still,* ***I was in a dark place.***

Every time my phone buzzed , I thought it might be news. Most of the time it wasn't. Housing just kept saying ***someone will get back to you, someone will get back to you.*** *But* ***where are these people getting back to me?***

There were times when I just thought, ***I can't live like this no more.*** *Without a proper house, you can't settle.* ***Because loads of places, they want an address. You sign up for a bank, what's your address? You want to get a job, they ask, what's your address? Everywhere, you need to write your address down.*** *You can't plan anything. You don't know where you'll be next month.* ***I'm just waiting.***

While I was there, they kept asking for more things. ID. Bank stuff. Proof that I was at risk. I'd explain what had happened, what I was dealing with. ***Every single week, I swear I'd been saying the same things to everyone*** *but there was always someone else we had to explain it to.* ***New Horizon understood*** *what had happened and why I couldn't go back to that area, but* ***housing just didn't seem to get it.***

Sometimes it felt like we were starting from the beginning every time.

What got to me wasn't just repeating it. It was seeing that it mattered who said it. When I explained my situation, it felt like it wasn't enough. When Debbie explained it, using the right words, it seemed to land properly. ***The way I talk doesn't sound formal,*** *so maybe it's that.*

> ***But housing have a set way and everything's done the same for everyone, just feels like a checklist sometimes, ticking a box.*** *- Aaron*

After a while, Debbie suggested I speak to a psychologist. She said having something official written down might help. At first I was suspicious, ***I thought maybe there was a link to the police.*** *But Debbie* ***reassured me that the psychologist was here to help, and she worked here too,*** *so I agreed.*

I forgot her name, but she helped me a lot. She was a nice woman. *She took her time and didn't just throw a load of questions at me that I couldn't answer. She asked about things that had happened before. About how I felt day to day. But in a way that made me feel comfortable rather than like I had to say the right thing. Not* ***like an interview, we were having a conversation.***

When the report came back, she said I had PTSD. ***I realised that I have underlying mental health issues*** *from everything I've been through, so that was a wake-up call. It helped explain why I was so anxious all the time. I thought there was something wrong with me, but the woman said it was normal given everything that had happened.*

After we had this mental health report, things started moving quicker. Just like Debbie said they might.



There were meetings where I tried to explain what kind of place I could handle. I said I'd struggle somewhere busy with lots of people coming in and out. I asked about safety, about working locks, said I didn't want to share with anyone. I didn't want to sound demanding, but I knew what would tip me over and what would be safe for me and mean I could move on with my life.

In one meeting I got frustrated and started shouting. I didn't mean to, it just came out. After that, the way they were speaking to me changed. Shorter answers. Less eye contact. It felt like they'd already made their mind up about me. The meeting didn't last much longer.

After that I was more careful. I'd say things were fine even when they weren't. I'd say I could manage.

Eventually housing said they had somewhere for me to go. It would still be temporary, for a few months or a year whilst they found me somewhere permanent, but at least that was better than being in hotels all the time.

That's what I thought, anyway. It turns out the house was a shared place, which I told them wouldn't be good for me. And it's grimey, the walls were scuffed, damp everywhere. The other people didn't wash up after themselves. The shower was gross, ***like, do I even want to shower here? People was getting robbed in the house.***

And ***I was surrounded by people that struggled just like me.*** *For* ***a lot of young people the only way they know how to make money is by drug dealing, because it's all they've ever done. And now they are trying to get away from it, but now they're surrounded by it, so it's the only thing they can do.*** *It's hard to keep focussed on moving on with my life there.* ***It's a bit, one foot in one foot out.*** *There are so many other people around, it would be easy for me to be recognised by someone, and bad stuff has happened – someone got stabbed in his room a few months ago. But at least the borough is ok for me, so it feels kind of safe.*

And anyway, it's what I have for now. Debbie is helping me tell housing that ***it's not really suitable for me because I am trying to move forward with my life,*** *and hopefully we will find somewhere better soon. I know that Debbie is doing everything she can.*

It's depressing, but you have to live a couple bad days to get one good day.

Debbie's perspective

When Aaron was referred to us, the Duty to Refer[2] had already been submitted, which was really helpful. That should mean the process is in motion, but in reality it often means weeks of follow-up.

The first thing I focus on in those situations isn't the paperwork, it's safety. If there isn't accommodation ready, I have to bridge the gap. In Aaron's case, that meant a hotel.

I'm always conscious that hotels look like a solution from the outside, but



[2] The Duty to Refer is a legal requirement under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. It places a duty on specified public authorities, including youth justice services, to refer individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to a local housing authority, with the individual's consent. The local authority must then assess the person's situation and determine what support they are entitled to.

they aren't. It might sound nice, but it's not an all-inclusive resort. They remove the immediate risk of being on the streets, but they're unpredictable and noisy, and for someone coming out of custody, that can be destabilising. It changes the risk, it doesn't get rid of it. We also can't book people into hotels for long periods of time, because we don't know when housing might get back to us. So Aaron had to deal with moving to loads of different hotels, with bookings for 2, 3 days at a time.

What's harder to see from the outside is what that does to someone. They're in an unfamiliar area, away from everyone they know. They don't have their things around them, they can't cook, they can't settle into any kind of routine. The people and places that gave them a sense of who they are - even if those connections carried risk - are gone, and there's nothing yet to replace them. For a lot of the young people we work with, that loneliness and loss of identity is one of the hardest parts. They're safe, technically. But they're alone, and they don't feel like themselves.

Aaron was in a hotel for far longer than we'd hoped. From his side, it probably just felt like waiting. From mine, it was constant follow-ups and trying to keep the case moving. Re-sending documents. Clarifying risk. Reframing the same information in slightly different language.

He was right about one thing - his words didn't seem to carry the same weight as mine. I find time and time again that systems tend to respond to professional language above what young people say directly. Part of my role always becomes translating what young people have said into words that move things forward. It's uncomfortable, but without it, cases stall. Housing didn't want to see Aaron as priority need, they were looking at him as a criminal, who would cause problems for the borough, rather than as a vulnerable person that needs a place of stability.



When I suggested a psychological assessment, I knew a formal diagnosis would strengthen his case. The PTSD diagnosis didn't change what he was living with day to day, but it did change how quickly the housing team responded. I think it helped him too – to understand a bit more about why he felt how he did – to feel a bit more 'normal'.

> ***Because of their experiences – and because the processes they have to go through can often be long and drawn out - lots of the young people we work with find it hard to stay in control when they attend meetings or appointments. It's even harder if they're neurodiverse or have specific mental health needs and there hasn't been any adjustments made for them, which is common.***
> *- Debbie*

There was a meeting where Aaron became frustrated and raised his voice. I understood why - weeks of waiting in a hotel would test

anyone's patience. But I could feel the shift in the room immediately. The conversation moved away from housing needs and towards behaviour, which is always the risk. When someone is seen as volatile and it becomes all about containment, that's when restrictions get tough and less emphasis seems to go on what somewhere will actually be like to live in for a young person. We have to work hard to counter that.

After that incident, I was careful not to shame him for it. Young people are often penalised twice - once for their circumstances, and again for how they react to them. I make a point not to do the same.

By the time the offer came through, I was relieved. Not because it was ideal, but because it meant he was no longer in limbo. The accommodation wasn't what he had hoped for. It was shared and tired-looking. But it ticked the box, which meant it was considered good enough.

There's a particular tension in housing work. You fight hard for movement, knowing that the outcome may still fall short of what the young person deserves. You celebrate securing a key, while knowing the environment itself may present new challenges.

My role, as I see it, is to absorb some of that frustration without passing it back to the young person. To be honest about limitations without stifling ambition.

Aaron deserves more than the bare minimum. But within the system we were working in, the difference between nothing and something is significant.



From Experience to Insight

Aaron'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.

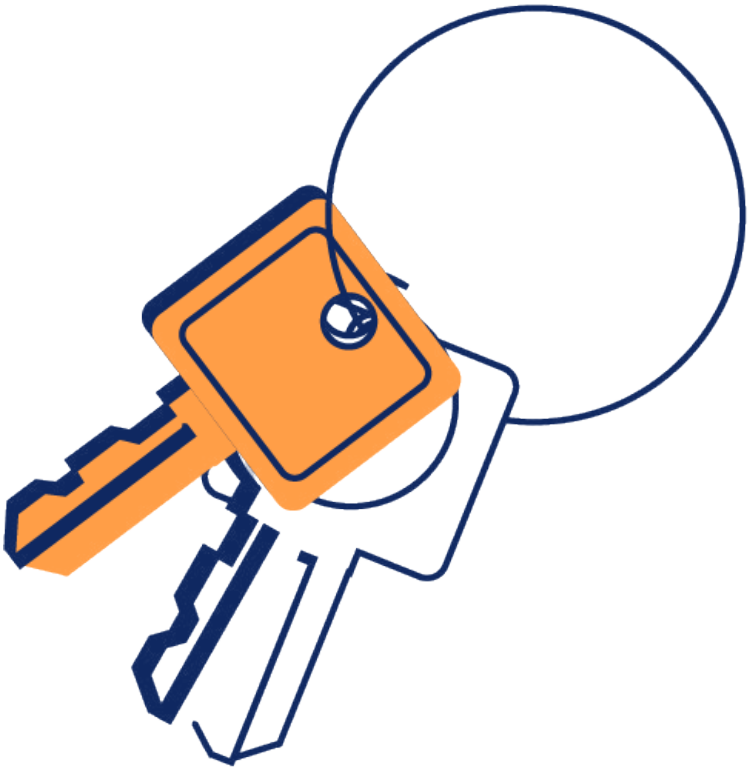
Housing pathways can be complex and hard to navigate

Aaron's experience shows that accessing accommodation is not always straightforward, even when need is clear. For many young people, the support they receive depends not only on their circumstances, but on how the system around them responds.

Across the cases we reviewed for the evaluation, processes for securing housing often involved multiple professionals, repeated requests for information and ongoing back-and-forth between services. From a young person's perspective, it could feel difficult to follow what was happening or who was responsible. In Aaron's case, this showed up as a process that felt like "starting from the beginning every time" – being asked for information, providing it, and then being asked again in slightly different ways. From his side, it was hard to see what was changing, or what would move things forward.

The practitioners we spoke to described how decisions did not always follow a consistent path. Thresholds were interpreted differently across services, and responsibility could shift between boroughs, particularly where cases were more complex. Where criteria were open to interpretation, similar situations could be handled in different ways depending on the borough, situation or individual staff member. This could lead to decisions taking longer to reach than they should - and sometimes left young people feeling as though they were being passed between services or that responsibility for their case was being avoided.

In this context, having consistent support alongside them made a significant difference. Aaron described how the process felt more manageable when Debbie was involved, helping him stay engaged and maintain contact with different services.



‘Proving’ vulnerability

Aaron’s experience highlights how access to accommodation can depend on how the challenges young people face are recognised and evidenced within formal systems.

Across the cases we reviewed, practitioners described how diagnoses and clearly documented markers of risk often became central to housing decisions. In Aaron’s case, the psychological assessment and PTSD diagnosis did not change what he was living with day to day, but it did change how his situation was understood by housing services. Once his mental health needs were formally recorded, progress began to move more quickly.

Whilst progress was made eventually, reaching that point required Aaron to repeatedly explain what had happened to him and how it was affecting him across different interactions and with different professionals. For many young people, this process can be exhausting, particularly when they are asked to describe difficult experiences in ways that fit formal criteria.

Practitioners reflected that support often depends on what can be clearly evidenced, rather than the full context of a young person’s life. Where needs are not formally recognised or recorded, it can be harder to influence systems that rely on documentation and thresholds. This can create a disconnect between what young people are experiencing and what services are able to respond to.

This was particularly evident in how systems respond to risk. Whilst official guidance does not require it, housing services frequently required police reports or crime reference numbers as evidence that a young person was unsafe. However, for many young people in this cohort, engaging with the police was not a straightforward option. Reporting an incident could carry serious consequences within their communities, including being labelled as an informant, which in some cases posed a direct threat to their safety. Practitioners described having to explain this dynamic to housing professionals - that a young person’s reluctance to report was not an indication that the risk was less serious, but reflection of the environment they were navigating, and in some cases remained exposed to. Without this advocacy, the absence of formal documentation could be taken at face value, leaving young people unable to evidence needs that were very real and reinforcing narratives that young people’s accounts, without police evidence, could not be trusted.



Practitioners also described how, in some cases, the level of evidence required can change over time. Even where vulnerability has been demonstrated, further information can be requested before support is provided. These unhelpful gatekeeping dynamics mean that access to support becomes contingent on meeting an increasingly high or evolving bar of evidence.

Moreover, how information is communicated, and who communicates it, can significantly influence how a young person’s situation is understood. Aaron and Debbie both

noticed that professional framing tended to carry more weight than what young people communicated directly. In Aaron's case, they described how people were more likely to take notice when Debbie spoke, even when she was presenting the same information Aaron had already shared himself. Practitioners told us that within professional input, there was also a hierarchy of influence. Clinical assessments and formal diagnoses were often given greater weight in decision-making than the knowledge and advocacy of youth workers, even where those workers knew the young person best.

This pattern also shapes how young people's behaviour is interpreted in these settings. Aaron described becoming frustrated during a housing meeting and raising his voice. His reaction reflected the pressure he had been under rather than an intentional choice to be aggressive or confrontational, yet the tone in the room shifted. Practitioners noted that expressions of distress or frustration can sometimes be interpreted as behavioural issues or indicators of risk, rather than as a rational response to prolonged uncertainty or unmet need. When this happens, young people's vulnerability can be obscured, making it more difficult to demonstrate need and secure the support required to move forward.

These dynamics sit within a broader narrative embedded in housing systems – one that draws, often implicitly, on longstanding distinctions between those considered "deserving" and "undeserving" of support. Young people navigating these systems are not only asked to evidence their need, but to do so in ways that demonstrate they are vulnerable enough to warrant help. For young people with involvement in the criminal justice system, this can mean having to repeatedly revisit difficult experiences and frame their own histories in terms that risk reinforcing negative perceptions of them. The very process designed to establish need can, in practice, work against the young people it is meant to support.

Delays are created by system friction

Aaron's experience illustrates how delays in accessing accommodation are often the result of multiple points of friction within the systems surrounding young people.

In his story, progress was repeatedly slowed by administrative processes that were not well aligned across services. Information had to be shared multiple times with different professionals, often in slightly different formats. This sense of "starting again every time" was hugely frustrating for Aaron – and for Debbie as she worked to move things forward. Across the evaluation, practitioners described how this duplication is common, particularly where communication between agencies is inconsistent or records are not easily transferred, for example between boroughs.

As discussed above, the process of evidencing need is often complex, and this can lead directly to delays in securing accommodation. Ongoing requests for information, such as identification documents, proof of risk or formal assessments from clinical teams, can extend the process, even where the need is already clear to those working with the young person. In Aaron's case, progress only began to accelerate once his experiences were formally documented through a psychological assessment.

At a system level, uncertainty around responsibility can further slow progress. Practitioners described occasions where, particularly in more complex cases, questions about which borough holds responsibility for housing can lead to back-and-forth between services. This is partly related to a lack of clarity within statutory rules, which allow for varied interpretations of the same requirements. While these complications are not always visible to young people, they contribute to the overall pace at which decisions are made.

Across the cases we reviewed, it was rare for a single issue to be responsible for delays. Instead, it was the combination of these challenges that created a sense of slow progress that was difficult to track from a young person's perspective but had significant impact on their immediate wellbeing and longer-term trajectories

Delays negatively affect young people's lives

Delays in accessing accommodation are often treated as an inevitable part of navigating complex systems. However, across the cases we reviewed, they had a clear and lasting impact on young people's experiences.

For Aaron, waiting for decisions to be made about his housing meant living with uncertainty for prolonged periods. He described checking his phone constantly for updates, expecting news that didn't come. Each unanswered call or message added the feeling that nothing was changing, which made it difficult to plan even the most basic aspects of his life. The practitioners we spoke to across the evaluation described similar patterns across other cases. Where the process of securing housing for a young person was complex or decisions were repeatedly delayed, young people felt anxious and 'in limbo'.



As Debbie did for Aaron, YJT practitioners often arranged emergency accommodation to prevent young people becoming street homeless while longer-term housing was being secured. These placements were typically in hotels, in areas considered safe for the young person. Across the evaluation period, delays in securing accommodation meant that many young people spent extended periods in emergency settings. In total, New Horizon Youth Centre spent £200,276.56 on emergency accommodation, equating to over 3,300 nights[3]. Monitoring data shows that at least one emergency bed night was arranged for 87 young people, suggesting an average stay of around 40 days per person.

While these placements were critical in preventing street homelessness, which can be particularly dangerous for this cohort, they did not offer stability and often prolonged the uncertainty young people were already experiencing.

Aaron described hotel living as isolating and restrictive. Everyday tasks such as cooking, storing food or doing laundry were not possible. He also talked about practical issues that made moving forward in such environments difficult. Without a fixed address, steps such as opening a bank account or accessing other services becomes harder. More fundamentally, hotel environments do not provide the conditions young people need to begin settling their nervous systems. Young people described them as noisy, unpredictable and lacking privacy, which meant that rather than support recovery they could reinforce hypervigilance and trauma responses. For young people already managing high levels of anxiety, this made it harder to feel safe, regulate emotions, or engage with support.

Practitioners also highlighted some overt safety risks associated with these

[3] Based on an estimated rate of £60 a night.

environments. Whilst efforts were made to place young people in safer areas, it was difficult to be certain who else was staying nearby. The conspicuous nature of hotels could also heighten young people's sense of vulnerability, again feeding their anxiety.

The impact of delays was also felt elsewhere in young people's journeys. For example, practitioners described situations where they were advocating to have a young person moved from accommodation that was unsuitable for them. Where these processes were slow, young people remained in environments that did not meet their needs and exposed them to additional risk.

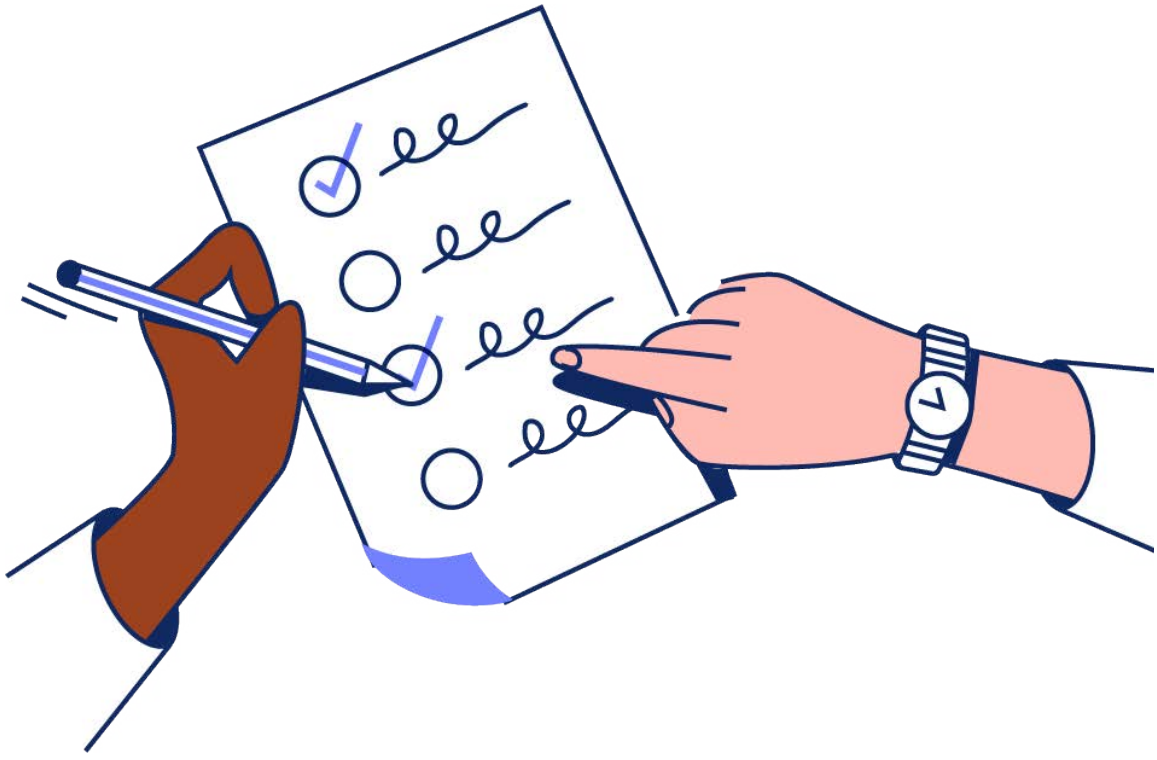
Securing accommodation does not always mean stability

Securing accommodation can be seen as a key milestone in young people's journeys – often the one that is most clearly recognised and prioritised within monitoring frameworks. However, across the cases we reviewed, it did not always lead to the stability that young people need in order to move forward.

In Aaron's case, the offer of accommodation marked a clear shift after a prolonged period of waiting. For Debbie, it represented progress and a sense of relief that the immediate uncertainty had been resolved. However, the accommodation itself did not reflect what Aaron had said he needed. It was shared, in poor condition, and placed him in an environment that he found difficult to manage. He described being housed alongside others who were dealing with similar difficulties – substance use, involvement in drug dealing, and their own experiences of violence. Rather than providing a settled environment from which to move forward, the placement brought him in close proximity with pressures he was actively trying to leave behind. Whilst it ticked the necessary boxes on paper, it was not somewhere he felt safe or able to settle.

Across the evaluation, cases like this often came down to how 'suitability' was defined. In many cases, accommodation was considered suitable if it reduced the immediate risk of harm. But this is not the same as providing an environment in which a young person can stabilise and begin to move forward.

Decisions about where young people are placed are often shaped by availability and rigid thresholds, rather than by a detailed understanding of how environments might be experienced day to day. As illustrated by



Aaron's experience, factors such as noise, exposure to substance use, or the presence of other young people with complex needs can all affect how safe or stable a placement feels. Placements that are far from young people's existing networks can also feel isolating. Where these factors are not taken into account, accommodation that meets formal criteria can still undermine young people's ability to regulate their emotions, engage with support, or focus on moving forward. This gap between what is considered suitable within housing systems and what actually supports young people to stabilise was a recurring barrier to progress.

Furthermore, risk assessments for placements also tend to be static - carried out at a single point in time rather than updated as conditions within a setting change. This means that shifts in young people's environments, such as changes in the mix of residents or increased proximity to substance use, may go unrecognised until a placement has already begun to break down. In practice, this can place additional pressure on YJT practitioners, who are often left to monitor and communicate emerging risks as conditions change.

Practitioners described a consistent tension in decisions around accommodation. Securing accommodation often required significant advocacy and persistence, particularly in complex cases. As a result, offers were sometimes seen as a positive outcome in themselves, even where they fell short of what the young person needed. This could place practitioners in a difficult position, where decisions involved accepting what was available rather than what was most suitable for the young person.

For young people, the impact of being placed in accommodation that did not meet their needs was significant. Environments that felt unsafe, chaotic or difficult to manage could reinforce the very challenges that support was intended to address. In some cases, this increased the risk of disengagement, conflict, or a return to harmful coping strategies.

Neurodiversity and mental health needs shape how young people experience housing systems

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. These needs affected how young people experienced both the housing process itself and the environments they were placed in.
The complexity of housing systems was difficult for most young people to navigate. Processes often involved multiple professionals, unclear timelines, repeated reassessment and inconsistent communication. Practitioners described how this could feel overwhelming, particularly for young people already managing anxiety, trauma or neurodivergence, making it harder to engage with processes or advocate for themselves.



The emotional demands of these processes were also significant. Being asked to repeatedly explain personal experiences, often in formal or unfamiliar settings, could be distressing, particularly for young people with trauma histories. Where communication was unclear or decisions were delayed, this could further increase anxiety and reinforce a sense of instability or lack of control.

The environments young people were placed in also interacted directly with their neurodiversity and mental health needs. For young people with ADHD, ASD, PTSD or anxiety, factors such as noise, unpredictability, lack of privacy, or exposure to conflict were not just challenging, but could be extremely overwhelming or dysregulating. Practitioners described how these environments could heighten sensory sensitivity, increase hypervigilance, and make it harder for young people to process information or manage their reactions.

We found examples across cases of behaviours linked to overwhelm, anxiety or dysregulation being interpreted as aggression or lack of engagement, rather than a response to an unmet need. This was a risk across the cases we reviewed, but it was particularly pronounced where young people's neurodiversity or mental health needs had not been formally recognised. In these situations, behaviours were more likely to be understood through a risk lens than as rational response to distress.



In contrast, environments that were quieter, more predictable and offered greater privacy created the conditions for regulation. In these settings, young people were better able to think more clearly, reflect on their situation, and engage with support. This difference was not about preference, but about how well an environment aligned with young people's underlying needs.

In this context, psychological assessment played an important role. In Aaron's case, his PTSD diagnosis changed how his needs were understood within the system. We found similar examples across the evaluation. Practitioners described how formal assessments could help translate young people's experiences into evidence that systems could recognise and respond to. While this helped get young people the support they needed, it also highlighted the extent to which needs often had to be formally documented before they were acted upon.

The cases we reviewed highlighted how housing is best understood as something that can either support or undermine regulation. Where environments did not take account of neurodiversity and mental health, they could reinforce distress and instability. Where they did, they created a foundation from which young people could begin to move forward.

The YJT 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 what might place a young person at risk and what might help keep them safe.

In Aaron's case, this approach was evident from the point at which he left hospital and needed somewhere to stay. The immediate risk of street homelessness had to be addressed, but options that were available to him (short-term hotel stays) introduced different risks. Debbie considered factors such as location, who else might be staying nearby, and whether Aaron was likely to be recognised or feel safe in an area before he was placed somewhere.

As Aaron's situation changed, so too did the nature of the risks he faced. Living in hotels for extended periods brought isolation, unpredictability and limited control over his environment. Later, when he was offered shared accommodation, different risks emerged. He found himself in an environment that felt chaotic and unsafe, with others around him involved in drug use and behaviours he was trying to move away from.

This kind of work involves deciding between options that all carry some level of risk, and judging which is the least harmful for that particular young person. Moving a young person does not remove risk altogether - it changes it. Practitioners therefore need to anticipate the risks that may emerge in a new placement and prepare to manage them.

This process involves continually updating assessments as circumstances change. Shifts in accommodation, changes in who young people are living with, or new information about how they are coping can all affect how risk is understood. Practitioners described staying close to what was happening in young people's day-to-day lives, using both direct conversations and information from other services to build a fuller picture.

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 Aaron's case, this included making clear how his experiences of violence, his mental health needs, and the environments he was being placed in affected his sense of safety and stability. Work in this area might involve participating in formal safeguarding discussions or multi-agency meetings, 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.

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

Managing pressures created elsewhere

Much of what shaped Aaron's experience as he tried to find suitable accommodation sat outside the control of the Youth Justice Team. Housing shortages, administrative delays, repeated requests for information and differing interpretations of thresholds all influenced the pace and direction of his journey. Practitioners described this as a consistent feature of their work - supporting young people within systems where key decisions are made elsewhere, often slowly and with limited transparency.

In Aaron's case, this was evident from the outset. Although a Duty to Refer had already been submitted, this did not translate into immediate access to accommodation. Instead, it marked the beginning of a prolonged process involving follow-ups, re-submissions of information and ongoing uncertainty. While these processes were largely invisible to Aaron, they shaped his day-to-day reality, which became defined by waiting, limited information, and a lack of clarity about what would happen next.

Rather than being able to resolve these issues directly, Debbie worked to manage their impact. This included maintaining regular contact with housing services, re-sending documents, clarifying information and continuing to push the case forward. At the same time, she had to ensure that Aaron was not left without accommodation while decisions were pending. In practice, this meant arranging a series of short-term hotel placements, often with limited notice and for only a few days at a time.

All of the practitioners we spoke to described working within constraints that cannot easily be changed. While they may advocate for more suitable or timely responses, they are often supporting young people to live within systems that are fragmented, under pressure, and not always aligned with their needs. In Aaron's case, the use of hotels reduced the immediate risk of street homelessness, but introduced a different set of challenges - instability, isolation and environments that were difficult to manage. Practitioners described needing to remain attentive to these shifts, recognising when pressures were building and responding in ways that helped prevent situations from deteriorating further.

Another important part of the role involved making these pressures visible to other agencies. Many of the professionals involved in housing decisions did not have an ongoing relationship with Aaron and were not directly exposed to the day-to-day impact of delays or temporary accommodation. Debbie therefore played a role in communicating the cumulative effect of these conditions - explaining how prolonged uncertainty, repeated moves and unsuitable environments were affecting his wellbeing and ability to move forward.
Aaron's story highlights how quickly the conditions surrounding a young person can

become difficult to manage, even where formal processes are in place. Progress is not shaped 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 outcomes.

Maintaining continuity across transitions

Aaron's story involved repeated changes in where he was staying, how things were being handled, and who was involved in supporting him. Moving between hospital, hotel placements and temporary housing meant that his circumstances were constantly shifting, and there was often little notice or clarity about what would happen next.

During these transitions, Debbie remained a consistent presence. While Aaron's accommodation changed frequently - sometimes every few days - her involvement didn't waver. From Aaron's perspective, much of the process felt like waiting, repeating information and starting again. But Debbie helped reduce some of the tension this created by staying close to what was happening for him over time.

Alongside advocating within the system, practitioners described the importance of simply staying alongside young people as things change. In Aaron's case, Debbie kept in touch during periods of uncertainty, continued to follow up on housing applications, and supported him through the day-to-day realities of living in temporary accommodation. This ongoing presence gave him something stable to hold on to at a time of immense uncertainty.

Practitioners spoke about the difference between moving a case forward and helping a young person live through what is happening to them. For Aaron, this involved not only progressing his housing situation, but helping him make sense of what was happening, preparing him for changes, and supporting him to say what he needed from future placements.

Aaron's story shows how a consistent, trusted relationship can act as a stabilising force within an otherwise fragmented system.



Supporting young people to navigate complex systems

At different points in their journeys, young people come into contact with multiple statutory processes, particularly in relation to housing and the criminal justice system, but also across health, social support and employment. These processes often involve different agencies, each with their own expectations, requirements and ways of working - especially where multiple boroughs are involved.

For young people, this can feel fragmented and difficult to follow. In Aaron's case, the housing process involved repeated requests for information, unclear timelines and limited communication. He described feeling like he was "starting from the beginning every time" - explaining his situation, providing information, and then being asked for it again in slightly different ways.

Debbie helped Aaron make sense of and keep track of what was happening around him. She acted as a consistent point of contact, helping him understand what different services were asking for, what might be causing delays and what the next steps might be. Part of how she did this was by explaining things in a way that Aaron could understand - using clear, straightforward language rather than technical terms. By drawing on her knowledge of how he communicates and pacing information carefully, she helped reduce confusion and prevent things from becoming overwhelming. In a process where much of his life felt out of his control, this helped him stay grounded during a difficult period of uncertainty.

Across the evaluation, practitioners told us that most of the young people they work with have little understanding of what support is available and what they are entitled to. This can be both a source of anxiety and a reason they do not ask for help. Some have simply never been told what they are entitled to, while others struggle because the way services are structured - with multiple agencies, thresholds and responsibilities - can be difficult to understand.

As such, part of practitioners' work involves helping young people understand what support should be available to them. This is partly so they are better equipped to speak up for themselves, but also so they can understand the advocacy that is happening on their behalf.

Aaron's story demonstrates how, with consistent support, processes that might otherwise feel overwhelming can become more manageable. By helping him understand what was happening, and how to move things forward, Debbie played a key role in enabling him to navigate a system that would have been difficult to manage alone.

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 a young person's situation in light of their experiences, relationships and underlying needs, and making sure that decisions about risk and support reflect that fuller picture.

Housing and safeguarding systems rely heavily on documentation and categorisation. Decisions are often shaped by what is written in assessments, referrals or case notes. Practitioners told us that important nuance can easily be lost when complex lives are reduced to what is recorded on paper, and that part of their role is to counteract this.

In Aaron's case, this was particularly visible in how his situation was initially understood by housing services. Despite the risks he faced and the impact of what he had experienced, he was not always recognised as vulnerable. Debbie reflected that he was often seen primarily through the lens of risk or offending, rather than as a young person in need of stability and support.

Part of Debbie's role involved helping to reframe his situation so that his experiences of violence, his mental health needs, and the reasons he could not safely return to certain areas were properly understood. The psychological assessment played an important role in this. It did not change Aaron's underlying needs, but it helped ensure they were recognised, which in turn led to more meaningful progress in his case.

Across the cases we reviewed, this "whole-person advocacy" was not limited to key moments. Practitioners described regularly engaging with what they referred to as "micro-decisions" - the many small decisions made across housing and other services that, when taken together, shape a young person's

trajectory. This might involve clarifying context in emails, contesting decisions made on incomplete information, or ensuring that key information is not lost as cases move between professionals.

In the context of systems that often prioritise thresholds, processes and risk categories, ensuring that decisions reflect the whole person requires sustained engagement and, at times, careful challenge.

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 services and systems. Practitioners are managing ongoing communication with housing teams, 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.



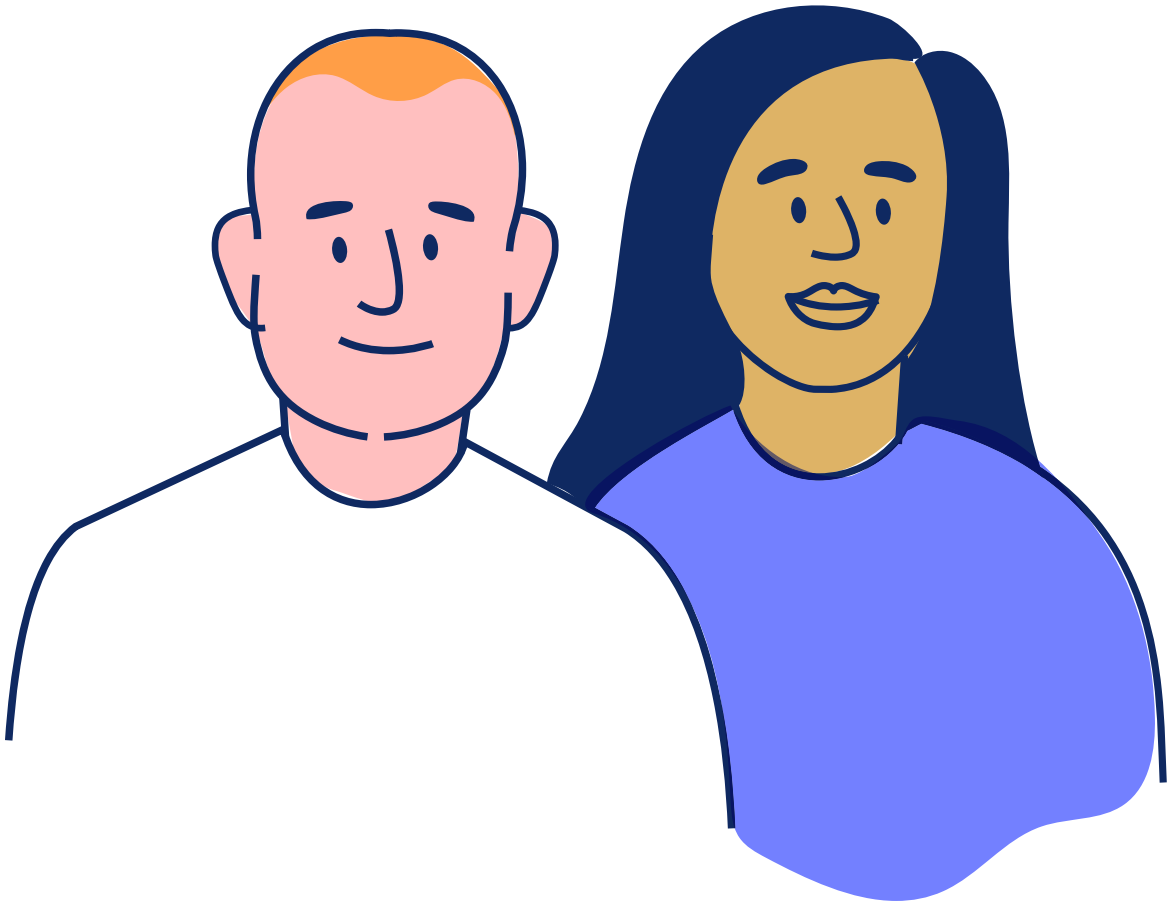
Much of this labour remains invisible. Emails, referrals, repeated requests for information, multi-agency communication, case recording and time spent following up with housing services take up a considerable proportion of practitioners' time. In Aaron's case, this included persistent follow-up with housing, re-sending documents and continuing to push the case forward over an extended period. 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. Practitioners described the effort involved in repeatedly evidencing need, articulating context and ensuring that young people's situations are fully understood within decision-making processes. The complexity of the role is further compounded by variation across boroughs, where housing thresholds, processes and decision-makers differ, requiring practitioners to hold detailed knowledge of multiple local systems at once.

Practitioners also described how the role regularly stretches beyond its formal boundaries, creating additional strain and responsibility. 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.

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

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



A System Perspective

The themes described in this report - the complexity of housing systems, the impact of delays, and the gap between what is considered suitable and what actually supports stability - were echoed in interviews with stakeholders throughout the evaluation. This section draws on those conversations to show how the dynamics in Aaron's story are recognised by people working across different parts of the system.

The impact of delays on young people was raised consistently. Professionals described how prolonged periods without stable accommodation did not simply defer progress, they actively undermined the conditions needed for recovery. One practitioner at a charity partner organisation described how being left without safe housing "activates their survival mode because you've just gone through a serious incident and you can't even go home, you can't even go and recover in a place of safety." They also made a point that echoed Aaron's own frustration: "You can't work on their benefits because they don't have an address. Sometimes you can't work on their ID or universal credit because you don't know what to put down. They can't get a job because they don't know where they're going to be living next." Without that foundation, everything else stalls.



Several professionals across charity partner organisations described the difficulty of getting young people's needs recognised within housing systems. A local authority housing officer acknowledged the difficulty of the decisions they are making. Many are managing high volumes of cases within systems that offer limited flexibility, and the thresholds they apply are often set at a level that does not easily accommodate the complexity of young people's situations. They described how having the YJT involved made a tangible difference to their ability to move cases forward, because practitioners could provide the context and evidence they needed to act. But where that kind of professional input was not available, the same cases could easily get stuck - not because of a lack of willingness, but because the information needed to justify a decision was not there in the right form.

Stakeholders across local authority teams and charity partner organisations- including those working within housing – acknowledged that when young people are given accommodation, there is often a gap between what they are provided with and what they actually needed. This rarely came down to the decisions of individuals. Instead, it reflected the limited options within a system under sustained pressure.

One former social worker spoke with directness: "I had placed a lot of young people and then I was honest with them. I was like, I wouldn't put my own child here. I'm so sorry that I have to leave you here." A practitioner supporting young people at a charity partner organisation described how shared properties could feel "institutionalised... the same as the prison" for young people coming out of custody. Another youth practitioner working at a

partner Vanguard project described how local authorities tend to concentrate released prisoners in the same buildings - “you’re putting all the vulnerable people in the same place” - creating environments where the pressures young people are trying to move away from are amplified rather than reduced.

These accounts confirm that the dynamics shaping Aaron’s experience are seen clearly by professionals across the system. What also came through was how hard people in every part of that system are working to support young people like Aaron. The barriers they described were not about a lack of commitment or care, but about structural conditions - housing shortages, rigid thresholds, fragmented services and under-resourced teams - that make it difficult to provide the stability young people need.

The challenges are systemic, and so are the solutions.



From Insight to Action

The recommendations below are directed at the wider systems and services involved in supporting young people to access accommodation. They are grounded in the learning from Aaron's story, alongside wider insights from the evaluation, and reflect the conditions that appear to support greater stability.

They focus on how these conditions can be built more consistently into systems, so that support does not depend on individual practitioners alone.

Reduce system friction in the process of accessing accommodation

Aaron's experience shows how delays are often created by the way systems operate - including repeated requests for information, unclear processes and inconsistent communication between agencies.

Helping young people to access safe accommodation more quickly will require attention to how these systems function in practice. In particular, this includes:

- **reducing duplication in information requests, so young people are not repeatedly asked to provide the same details;**

- **improving coordination between services, particularly where multiple boroughs are involved;**

- **ensuring that information can move with the young person, rather than needing to be re-submitted at each stage; and**

- **providing clearer communication about timelines, responsibilities and next steps in a way young people can understand.**

These changes would help reduce delays, improve transparency and make the process more manageable for young people.



Build continuity into housing pathways

Debbie's consistent involvement throughout Aaron's journey made it possible for him to navigate the systems around him without becoming overwhelmed. This kind of consistency was evident across the cases we reviewed, and appeared to be fundamental in supporting young people to achieve more positive outcomes. However, it currently sits largely with individual practitioners rather than being built into the way systems work.

Housing pathways should do more to hold continuity for young people as they try to move forward with their lives. This includes avoiding cliff-edges where support drops away as circumstances change, ensuring that transitions between placements and services are managed gradually, and maintaining a clear sense of who is supporting the young person at each stage. Where possible, having one person who stays involved can provide a sense of stability when everything else is changing.

Make housing processes easier for young people to understand

Aaron's experience highlights how complex and fragmented housing systems can be difficult to understand, particularly when multiple agencies are involved. This can increase anxiety, make processes feel overwhelming, and reduce young people's willingness to engage with support.

We recommend that services review how understandable their processes are from a young person's perspective, taking into account factors such as neurodiversity, mental health and the cumulative impact of stress and uncertainty. This should include how processes work in practice, who is eligible for different types of support, and how information is used in decision-making.

We also recommend that services work directly with young people to develop how this information is communicated. Co-developing materials, processes and ways of explaining support can help ensure that they are clearer, more accessible and easier to engage with. This can make the process feel more manageable, improve transparency, and help build trust between young people and services.



Take a whole-person approach to housing decisions

Aaron'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-person' approach will help agencies better understand what will make a 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.

Strengthen how risk is assessed in housing decisions

Aaron's experience shows that moving a young person into accommodation often does not remove risk, but changes it. Different placements carry different risks depending on factors such as location, environment and who else is present, and these are not always fully considered in decision-making.

We recommend that risk assessment processes take a more structured and comprehensive approach. This should include explicit consideration of factors such as proximity to support networks, the presence and behaviour of others in the

environment, and how well a placement aligns with a young person's mental health and neurodevelopmental needs.

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

Recognise and resource the work required to create stability for young people

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

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



Conclusion

Aaron's story brings together experiences from young people supported by the Youth Justice Team at New Horizon Youth Centre. It shows how attempts to access accommodation are shaped not only by individual circumstances, but by the interaction between complex systems, thresholds and decision-making processes.

Across the evaluation, several consistent patterns were evident. Housing pathways were often difficult to navigate, with multiple agencies involved and limited clarity about responsibility. Access to accommodation depended on how need was recognised and evidenced within formal systems, with vulnerability needing to be demonstrated in specific ways before action was taken. This contributed to delays, during which young people were often left in unstable or unsuitable situations, including extended periods in emergency accommodation. Even where accommodation was secured, it did not always provide the conditions needed for young people to feel safe, settle or move forward.

Aaron's story also shows what it takes to support a young person through this level of complexity. Debbie remained closely involved throughout, advocating across systems, translating lived experience into forms that could be recognised, and maintaining continuity during periods of uncertainty. Her role extended beyond progressing the housing process itself, helping to manage the impact of delays and support Aaron to navigate environments that were often difficult to sustain.

Currently, providing this level of consistent, relational and system-facing support often depends on individual practitioners working within systems that are not designed to provide the same level of coordination or flexibility. The challenges described throughout this report are structural, and they shape both the pace of decision-making and the quality of outcomes for young people. The recommendations set out identify practical ways these conditions can be addressed, with the aim of improving access to suitable accommodation and enabling more stable transitions for young people navigating housing systems.

