

# CUSTODY TO COMMUNITY: SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO COPE WITH RELEASE

## A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

### Introduction

This briefing is about the way that young people experience the transition from custody back into the community. The early days to weeks following release can be an overwhelmingly stressful experience for young people. While some navigate this period relatively smoothly, the dominant theme is that young people find it hard to cope, and feel disorientated when adjusting to life in the community. This relates to adjustments to the sudden change in life regime, environment and the renegotiation of relationships. Consideration of this adjustment period can be critical for longer-term resettlement success.

This report identifies recommendations for practitioners to ease the transition process by:

- Acknowledging the disorientation and anxieties arising at the point of release from custody
- Highlighting the issues which may affect resettlement planning, engagement and sentence enforcement (and hence 'success')
- Offering practitioners examples of promising practice which may support their work with young people

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## Release as a period of reorientation

Staff in secure establishments report that young peoples' behaviour can often change in the period leading up to the end of their custodial sentence, as anticipation of their release date gets closer.

” Will somebody be picking me up?, What am I going to do?, How am I going to move on in life?, Where will I be staying? etc... these questions will go over and over a person's head with sleepless nights filled of excitement and tension of getting out of prison.

Practitioners working with young people who are newly released from custody will often be presented with clues that 'something's not right'. The initial period of release involves a transition process for the young people, as they try to readjust to the outside world after incarceration. While the length of this period varies, young people refer mostly to days and weeks. While some navigate this period relatively smoothly, many struggle to cope with this period. This process includes, among other things, reacclimatising to the space and pace of life in the community, and renegotiating relationships.

The way that these challenges are experienced is often difficult to articulate, but certain words are used repeatedly and very consistently by young people describing how it was for them immediately following release. Therefore, the voices of young people have been included in this briefing to give air to their lived experiences.

” I didn't like it, being outside. I was scared. I didn't even want to leave, I just wanted to go back to my cell really. I knew I was free, but I was scared because I didn't know what to do with it.

” It's like someone throwing you out of a plane, with nothing strapped on. How the hell am I gonna ride this wind?

Typically, the disorientation after release is described generally as them feeling 'strange' and 'weird' – life is unsettling and destabilising at this point.

” My first night at home, I had a good night's sleep, but it was weird. I woke up thinking, 'oh, I am really home'. I've had dreams in prison, that when you wake up, you're gonna be at home and when you wake up, obviously you're not. It happens to a lot of people. It happened to me a few times when I first went in. But this time, I woke up and I was still at home.

The disorientation is made all the more difficult to cope with because it is often unanticipated by young people, having only framed their anticipated release in a positive light. It can come to them as a stress-inducing shock.

” When you're inside, everyone's like, 'yeah as soon as I get out, I'm gonna get drunk', 'I'm gonna do this', whatever. But when you actually get out, you realise you have freedom, so you don't want to do any of that. Like on the first day, you just go home. You don't really realise when you're in there.

The period immediately after release has been identified as a window of opportunity during which young people may be committed to giving up offending. The shock of leaving custody, however, if not addressed, might tend to undermine that commitment, thereby reducing the prospects for desistance. This tension might help to explain why reoffending, breach and return to custody are also particularly prevalent in the early period following transfer to the community. From a resettlement perspective, it highlights the importance of recognising that stress is associated with release and developing practice to take account of this.

## Negative symptoms experienced after release

### Overwhelming stress symptoms

Stress and anxiety are prevalent themes in young people's detailed descriptions of release. Stress reactions are normal in the face of challenge, but become problematic when they interfere with functioning. Anxiety presents as nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worrying. It affects how we feel, think and behave. Symptoms can be physical, such as shaking and nausea, as well as emotional, when they find that they cannot operate for some time upon release.

” When my mum came and picked me up from the prison, when I came out and I was sitting in the car, I felt sick. I was shaking cos I didn't know what to do and that.

These symptoms of anxiety can become too much for young people and they become low in mood, upset or break down emotionally. They find that they cannot cope with the strangeness of release and are unable to function in the outside world for at least a short period of time.

” I couldn't handle it, like the first day I couldn't handle being out of prison. I just couldn't stop crying and felt depressed all the time.

### Quiet and withdrawn

Some young people react to their release disorientation by becoming quiet and withdrawn; they may not want to talk to anyone, or leave their home or bedroom. This can be exacerbated by a fear of getting into trouble if they leave the house, or being returned to custody. They may perceive the 'outside world' as unsafe, and feel scared of people, as described below:

” When I came out, my head was all over the place. I lost out on a lot of stuff, family and stuff ... I just isolated myself ... I moved back into my room at my auntie's and just locked my door... I just sat there... it was just normal: go to your room, lock the door... I didn't leave the house properly, unless I had to go probation, for about two weeks.

” When you're in prison and someone starts taking the piss, you have to stand your ground. When you get out, you're always on your guard. You're extra paranoid. You'll be thinking someone's following you. It's a weird feeling; it's not a good feeling. I was pretty scared of going out actually. All the noise and stuff like that.

### Physical tiredness

Young people also report physical tiredness after release. This may be another physical manifestation of stress, but is generally put it down to feeling the effects of the change in pace and increased physical activity in the outside world.

” I just used to get right tired, cos inside you used to like walk around there not doing much really.

” And walking as well, that was mad, walking. My legs felt like spaghetti.

## What is stressful about the transition process?

It is understandable that the period of transition would require a process of readjustment and reorientation, but what aspects of this process lead to the kinds of negative effects outlined previously?

### Scared by the sudden change

The most stressful aspect of the transition highlighted by young people is simply their struggle to comprehend the complete and sudden change in their life regime, following the previous major life event of imprisonment. Young people report being overwhelmed, lost and confused.



I came out and I was scared. I didn't know what to do, I didn't know where to go. I kept sitting down. I was like seeing cars going past and I was like, "Can't believe I'm out".



Lost, I think I was. I didn't know where I was going to go or what. I just came out of there. It was like my life had just stopped and swung back round and kicked me.

### Pace and lack of structure

Another source of stress reported is the perception that, after the relatively sedentary regime in custody, everyone is rushing around madly. Furthermore, young people can find it difficult to adapt from the structured and ordered nature of the custodial regime to a potentially chaotic home life.



Just my sleeping pattern. In custody I woke up in the morning and make the bed and then eat my breakfast for a certain time. But it's just getting back into a sleeping pattern.



I came home and everything was faster, cos everything's really slow in custody. You don't really do owt do you? So you come out and everyone's just rushing about as normal and... so it takes you a while to keep up and carry on

### The familiar is unfamiliar

Young people are surprised to find that elements of their environment that were familiar and taken for granted before custody seem unfamiliar on release. Seeing everything as new, without a sense of normality, is destabilising for them.



Dunno, I was shocked really...happy to get out, yeah... but yeah, it felt weird. Like seeing a bus and everything, it felt weird.



I was walking into shops and I was thinking, "Oh my gosh", cos I didn't see a shop inside. I didn't actually like... all I saw was pure girls. I didn't see like cars or food, shops and that.

### Adapting to outside changes

The process of familiarisation is undermined by suddenly coming across elements of their home environment that have, indeed, changed while they were in custody. This destabilises them further and can cause confusion and anxiety.



I didn't have a key to the door. Actually, when I first come back, the houses had just been done up, all the houses in the row, so when I stood in front of my house, I wasn't sure if it was my house or not. I was looking at it for a while, 'Is that my house? I hope this is my house'.

## Learning to interact again

Interaction with people, even family and friends, can also be problematic. There is a period of reestablishing and renegotiating the relationships that were interrupted by incarceration, and of relearning communication skills.

” When you’re in prison, it’s full of people that you can’t trust. You don’t share stuff... First couple of months after getting out, I was still a bit paranoid ...didn’t know how to act around people... Including family, everyone, because obviously, you’re used to seeing them every two weeks.

” I didn’t know what to say to mum and dad when I came out. And I didn’t know what to say to my friends. I like never talked to hardly anyone. I just kept myself to myself.

Interacting can also be made more stressful when people are keen to hear all about the custody experience. Family and friends may (understandably) want to give their returning young people extra attention. There is also the ‘double-edged sword’ of re-acquaintance with previous peer groups.

” In the first couple of weeks your mates get in touch and they know you’ve got no money. They’ll be like, ‘Come and do this with us, you’ll be fine’. All sorts of crime, it’s tempting. It’s easy to go back to it... It depends on the person concerned being determined not to go back to it... The first two weeks, when you can start reoffending... It was tempting, because some of them are into drugs and have pots of money and I was like, \*sigh\*.

” Cos everything was going too fast. Like people, all my family were coming over, get all this birthday stuff and....I dunno, like every time I see someone, it was like “Oh how was prison?” “How was this, how was that?” and yeah, it was just the same thing over and over.

### YOUNG ADVISOR U R BOSS PROJECT



Everyone seems to be nervous as it comes to release. It is something that you have looked forward to, but at the same time when it approaches you’re aware that there is a reality waiting for you which you have not been a part of. Prison is like a bubble. Officers know they’re dealing with prisoners,

other prisoners can’t judge you for being in prison because they are in the same boat. When you are released, you’re returning to situations which were already problematic... usually made worse by being locked away from them and unable to deal with them for such a long period of time, and now with the added stigma of having been in jail and just a nervousness about everyday interactions and open spaces. I remember walking out the gates and feeling really conspicuous. I had gone into prison in summer, when I was leaving prison it was freezing cold outside. Nobody was noticing me but I felt really vulnerable, like an alien in my own skin because I just did not know what life was going to be like now that I had a criminal record and had been to prison.

## Conclusion – disorientation and reorientation

Young people experience disorientation following release because the transition destabilises them. In order to move towards successful resettlement and desistance young people need to effectively re-orient themselves. In the meantime, the early days and weeks can be an overwhelmingly stressful experience. Some experiences are consistent with adjustment disorders which carry increased risks of long-term psychiatric illness and suicide.

The experiences of young people point to three key aspects of sudden change in the transition:



### Life regime

Sudden change, a faster pace of life and lack of familiar structure are disorienting. Meals need to be cooked; advertising persuades you to spend what little money you have; you have endless appointments; your friends now use Instagram to communicate. Re-orientation requires re-adjustment to a new regime and lifestyle.



### Environment

What was once familiar (and 'safe') seems unfamiliar. Things have changed whilst you've been away. Your family has moved house; your bedroom has been 'de-cluttered' and given to your brother; you've lost your flat; Universal Credit has been introduced. This requires a period of re-familiarisation over time.



### People

Interacting becomes difficult. Interrupted relationships require renegotiation. Your mum's got a new partner; staff at the YOT are unfamiliar; your child is being adopted. Relationships and interaction skills need re-development.

## Disorientation and reorientation following release from custody

Focus of change	Disorientation problems	Reorientation process
Life regime	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· sudden change</li> <li>· faster pace of life</li> <li>· lack of motivation</li> </ul>	Readjustment to new regime
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· familiar seeming unfamiliar</li> <li>· alterations while inside</li> </ul>	Refamiliarisation to environment
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· uncomfortable interacting</li> <li>· interrupted relationships</li> <li>· difficulty talking to opposite sex</li> </ul>	Renegotiation of relationship and redevelopment of interaction skills

This process is made more difficult because:

- Young people may not have developed strategies to cope with transitions
- This particular group have higher levels of need and vulnerabilities
- They are more likely to have to orient themselves around a chaotic home environment
- They are simultaneously trying to renegotiate a post-custody identity for themselves
- Research suggests that structural support such as stable accommodation, education, training, employment and financial stability on which to build their reorientation may well not be available by the time of release

## Recommendations

” The first two weeks is... well, you know, in that two to three weeks the person who's just got out of jail is more likely to reoffend... If you've got nowhere to go, nowhere to live, and nobody there for you, then the only place there is for you is jail really. Like loads of my mates, they're in every so many weeks.

Meaningful engagement and work on shifting the young person towards a more constructive narrative cannot begin while they are struggling to cope with feeling lost and stressed on release from custody. Consequently, if incarceration is absolutely necessary, it is essential that policymakers and practitioners take steps to ease the transition for young people returning to the community.

The first step is for policymakers and service providers to acknowledge that release involves disorientation and can provoke anxiety. Once aware, they can begin to understand and anticipate the likely reactions of young people, and take these into account in planning, carrying out, and enforcing sentences. For example, during the period of readjustment, expecting a young person to comply with intensive early licence requirements (and avoid breach proceedings) may in effect be implausible - insisting upon compliance without understanding barriers risks 'setting them up to fail'.

### Preparing for release in custody

Young people need to be prepared well in advance for these post-release challenges, as do their families and other support networks. Appropriate support should be in place to guide them through a destabilising and stressful period in order to promote quicker and more successful longer-term resettlement.

- Young people need to be made aware, in advance, of how they may feel upon release. Ideally, the young people should undergo a planned preparation for release that begins as early as possible during their custodial period, helping them to find and adopt coping mechanisms for the huge changes facing them.

” I did have like little sessions with the YOT worker when I was inside, just to like prepare me for coming out. Same worker I had on the outside. Just like, 'What's gonna change when you come out', and that. How you're going to react to being out, and what you've got to do to fit back in to your family, household and community. He came every week for the last month, maybe six weeks.

- Resettlement can also be aided by an increased use of temporary release to help refamiliarise (or familiarise if it is a new area) a young person with their home environment. Extending the use of temporary release for even short periods of time would also facilitate a more graduated process of re-adjustment, enabling young people to get used to the change of pace and the extent of change they will experience when they leave the confines of custody, and minimise the shock associated with release. Temporary release is ideal for interviews for education or for placement visits, and can reduce the psychologically destabilising impact of simple changes such as finding that you can't pay with cash on a London bus.

” If just for an hour, just like walking around.

- Physical preparation of the young person for life outside could help reduce tiredness and better equip them to cope with the pace of life and activities outside. Physical activities in the institution should consider the likely needs of young people on release and prepare them accordingly to combat the sudden shift from a largely sedentary regime.
- Renegotiating relationships and interactions with those closest to them could be aided by focusing more on family interactions while inside. Although young people are increasingly held many miles from home, regular communication with as many family and friends as possible should be encouraged. Such contact should not be restricted in any way as part of a behavioural management scheme or as a disciplinary sanction.
- Providers of resettlement services should ensure that they assist parents and other family and friends to visit the young person regularly when inside, if the young person wishes it. Institutions should also consider how they can facilitate more alone time between young people and their families before release in order to help start the renegotiation process.
- Early planning for release is crucial, beginning as soon as the custodial period starts and with early confirmation of the resettlement arrangements that will be in place when the young person leaves the institution. This is not only so that interventions are able to start promptly on release, but also so that the young person has an opportunity to prepare themselves for where they are likely to be living and what they are likely to be doing when they leave.



I don't understand why they don't sort out the housing and stuff before you leave. It leaves me on the edge. At what point do you bid for a flat? You can't never bid for a flat from here, can you?



**POSITIVE PRACTICE**  
**Buckinghamshire YOS**

John was 17 when he received a lengthy custodial sentence. Upon release, he was due to be relocated out of town. His YOS worker and leaving care personal advisor identified that he would need support upon release. When they visited John in custody, he appeared really motivated to change his behaviour and lifestyle. He was an independent young man. He didn't want a mentor, refused any 'mollycoddling' and expressed a desire to be self-sufficient.

While John was inside, his reference points remained static, but the outside world moved on. Public transport was overhauled, bus numbers and routes changed; the corner shop which John used as a navigation point fell derelict. John's workers didn't want any barriers to interfere with his progress; they didn't want to set him up to fail. From a practical point of view, they didn't want John to get lost and fail to show up for appointments. They had the idea of using pictures as a platform for discussion and reorientation.

The YOS worker took photographs of the area to which he was to be released, and showed them to him in custody. They discussed what remained and what had changed, where he was in relation to what he knew. The next time she visited, they drew a map of key locations and reference points by which he could navigate. They discussed what he would like to achieve in his first week of release.

At the gate, John was met by his aftercare personal advisor. The day after release, John and a mentor carried out a dummy run of his bus route to college; en route they noted his new points of reference – the fast food restaurant on that corner, the place to catch the bus to town, and where his college was.

### Considerations for practice

Does your organisation:

- Keep young people informed about changes to their home environment?
- Encourage young people to think and talk about how they feel about leaving custody and develop strategies for dealing with potential stress and anxiety post-release?
- Develop a relapse prevention plan in conjunction with the young person to develop coping strategies and life skills to minimise risk of reoffending?
- Provide opportunities for temporary release to help refamiliarise young people with the community environment?
- Consider conducting review meetings outside of the secure establishment, such as at the YOT or probation building, on temporary release?
- Focus on family interactions in advance of release and facilitate discussion between young people and their parents or carers around agreed expectations and boundaries?
- Focus on resettlement from the start of the sentence, putting practical measures in place to ensure the young person is prepared for life post-release?



### POSITIVE PRACTICE Clayfields House Secure Children's Home

#### Transition planning from custody to the community

At Clayfields House a detailed transition plan is developed for each young person in a 'multi-disciplinary care and sentence planning meeting' which is held monthly. All professionals are involved from the unit, as well as external partners from the area the young person is due to be released to and also involve parents and carers where possible. The aim of the plan is to consider all of the relevant aspects of their transfer into the community to ensure that clear goals are set and progress is monitored, including finance skills, life skills, health, identity, transportation, accommodation, support network, education etc. If the senior management team at Clayfields feel that the placement offered for post-release is inappropriate, they will advocate to the relevant authorities on behalf of the young person.

A core element of this transition plan is an individual relapse prevention plan for the young person. Each young person also works with their intervention worker to create a "Top Tips" booklet. This is for them to refer back to and guide them through their transition, as well as being a useful tool for the staff at their new placement. The plans are co-created with young people and then reviewed three weeks prior to discharge. Below is an extract from an ex-resident's plan:

*"The Key to my Success: Because reoffending is not my destiny*

*When I leave Clayfields I will have been locked up for 3 years. I know there will be all kinds of temptations and things to cause me stress. I have tried to think ahead about what they might be and how I will handle them. I can look back at my plan if things get tough.*

*I need to give myself time to think. When I act on the spur of the moment I make more mistakes. When I have time to think I know what I should have done and why. When I think first about consequences I do and say the right things. When I feel strong emotions I can still do and say the right things if I give myself time to think first. I can say how I feel in the right way. I can walk away when I need to. People who think this is weak or don't respect it are not important to me. I don't care what they think."*

Sometimes key workers and/or intervention workers will have sessions post discharge booked and planned in post-release, often weekly, for about a 6 week period, dependent on the young persons needs.

## The importance of 'through the gate'

- Early planning for release, beginning as soon as the custodial period starts, is vital, as is early confirmation of the arrangements that will be in place when the young person is released. This is not only so that interventions are able to start promptly on release, but also to enable the young person to prepare themselves for where they are likely to be living and what they are likely to be doing when they leave.
- All young people should be met 'at the gate' of the institution on the day of their release by someone familiar that they trust. If family or friends are unavailable (or unsuitable), then any service provider meeting the child must be known to them. If this relationship was not one developed prior to the custodial sentence, then particular attention should be paid to ensuring that interpersonal rapport is built up during the custodial phase – this will mean more regular contact than sentence planning meetings.

### PETER'S STORY



By the time he got to 23, Peter had spent nearly seven years in custody. During his last sentence, he made a choice to change. He spoke to the Christian Chaplain one-to-one weekly, and worked on regulating his emotions and behaviour. When his release date was close, the Chaplaincy team referred Peter to [a resettlement project]. He was

matched with a mentor, and they got to know each other inside. Peter's mentor met him at the prison gate. Peter was under probation supervision, so they were made aware that he was working with [the project]. Peter didn't understand the statutory support to which he was entitled; his mentor guided him through agencies and processes in order to ensure access to, for example, Jobseeker's Allowance. Peter continued to address some of his deep-seated psychological issues by meeting with a counsellor. His mentor has been able to encourage him to attend these tough appointments, and has been on-hand to help Peter process his new identity. Peter currently meets his mentor once a week. Together, they persist when things don't work out as planned.

## Supporting release in the community

- Consideration must be given to practical support which might minimise the trauma of transition. On occasion this will require the availability of additional resources to allow young people to buy clothes or other things that will make them feel more comfortable in what has become an unfamiliar environment.



I've been coming to the resettlement project every day... speaking to these guys and sorting myself out... if I needed food and that, then they're here... if I need help with... changing my probation worker, or accommodation, these guys will help me. They've helped me quite a few times... I come here for an hour a day... I could spend all day here if I wanted to.



When people first get out they're all happy and that, 'ah the things I can do'. But the first thing on their mind will be 'how am I going to make some money? They need someone out there helping them out, asking them what they can see themselves doing, what they want to do.

- A structured timetable should be put in place for the initial period after release. This should bear in mind the stressful symptoms of disorientation, including withdrawal, so should be flexible and adaptable to the individual. Moreover, the timetable should not place unreasonable expectations on young people, recognising that intensive activity immediately on release from incarceration might simply increase the trauma associated with the transition to the community. Intervention should accordingly be planned in a graduated manner, increasing what is expected of young people according to how quickly and successfully they are able to readjust to life outside of prison.



I was supervised by the YOT when I got out... they helped me. They just asked me how I was doing, if I had any problems. Then they tried to put me back into a situation where I could have fun again. Like, they would take me ice skating if I'd done three sessions and I'd kept to their rules, they'd treat us to like a concert or something like that.

- Service providers should consider activities during the initial period after release that specifically aid the reorientation process. These may help readjustment by, for instance, facilitating families and young people to have more structure to their timetable or lifestyle than they are used to. Service providers may help with refamiliarisation by perhaps mentoring them into their surrounding environment in a controlled and supported way, with appropriate briefing and debriefing. They may help renegotiation of relationships by perhaps facilitating sessions and scenarios with family and friends, and guiding interaction in a positive way.

### Considerations for practice

Does your organisation:

- Visit a young person whilst they are in custody to start building a relationship before release?
- Ensure the young person is met at the gate by someone they know and trust?
- Offer intensive contact around the point of the transition, providing support and encouragement to keep to appointments and navigate services?
- Offer practical support to the young person, such as a means of telling the time, map of their local area and a basic package of necessities?
- Develop and offer a structured, optional timetable for the weeks after release and suggestions for keeping busy with constructive activities?
- Help young people to renegotiate their relationships by engaging with their family and peer group?



### WAYNE'S STORY

Wayne was almost 18 when he was released from a Young Offenders Institution, having been in custody for 10 months. The YOT had organised for him to start on a college course shortly after release. The course wasn't due to commence straight away, so the [resettlement project] team arranged for Wayne to get involved with a local bike project as soon as he returned to the community. He was released from custody on a Friday and started work on the Monday. This part-time job enabled Wayne to build up skills and experience, and he was hopeful that it would lead to more secure employment in the future. Wayne said that this helped him get into a routine and meant that he didn't go back to negative social influences through hanging around with his old mates.

## Summary

This practitioner briefing aims to address the way that young people experience the transition from custody to community and, in particular, the stresses of disorientation and reorientation following release. It offers practitioners examples of good and promising practice to support their work and ease the transition process for young people.

This practitioner's guide is based on the research report:  
Bateman T and Hazel N (2015) Custody to Community: How young people cope with release: research report  
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