



## **A call for optimists, dreamers and change-makers**

**How we manifest a more just system for  
young adults**

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Cynics feel free to scroll past this piece.

*"If the problems in the justice system were easy to fix, they'd have been fixed by now..."*

*Melissa Case - Leadership and Development Coach & Former MoJ Policy Director*

This sobering truth was handed to me when I was a bright-eyed, bushy-tailed policy official, within a couple weeks of starting my Justice career. At the time, I led the private office for the Director General for Justice Policy, and later moved to the Youth Justice Policy Team in MoJ HQ. I think the director could smell the optimism on me, could sense I was flirting with the idea of reform (and its spicier cousin - revolution).

She was right to try and protect me - and these words offered me strange comfort when I eventually fell down the chasm between my optimism and the scale of issues within justice (and literally landed on a therapist's couch...)

Taking on a secondment in the third sector has (thankfully) renewed this optimism. At the Barrow Cadbury Trust, I've taken up a role as an Embedding Manager, supporting their Transitions to Adulthood (T2A) Programme. The Programme has run for nearly two decades now - and I'm responsible for taking the impressive evidence base they have developed on Young Adults and transitions in the criminal justice system, and converting it into changes to policies and practice, which can be felt on the ground. For those who are interested, this wealth of evidence can be found at [t2a.org.uk](http://t2a.org.uk)

It has been a genuine joy to spend each day working with and talking to optimists from all sectors, who care about the system and are dedicated to playing their part in bringing about positive change. And though it is easier to focus on the barriers to change - I have always found it more productive to focus on the fact that positive change can and does happen regardless.

In focusing on the latter, I frequently surprise myself in how much easier it is to find value in my work, discover inspiring people and projects, learn new approaches and accept constructive challenge. All of this improves what I deliver day to day, feeds into my optimism, and fuels my sense of job satisfaction and contributing (in small and large ways) to a more compassionate, progressive criminal justice system.

A lot of this is linked to **mindfulness**. I accept it is an odd focus for an article on young adults and transitions. But I'm leading with mindfulness because it's a free resource we all have access to. We are all capable of arriving at working and telling ourselves:

*"I have the power and ability to create positive change within the Criminal Justice System."*

*"I believe in a fair and just society and am committed to working towards that goal."*

*"I am open to new ideas and perspectives, and I am willing to learn and grow as I work towards my personal and professional goals."*

Trust me, say these enough times - start each day saying these - and the change in mindset will surprise you too. You're of course welcome to replace these with anything that will help you tap into a more positive, inspired and energised mindset. (Pro tip - you can ask AI to write affirmations for you using [Chat GPT!](#))

I also lead with mindfulness because I'm aware of how much everyone at all levels of the Probation Service has struggled over the past couple of years in particular - the mental health, job satisfaction and confidence of staff is something that should be at the forefront of each reform. If it isn't, we really need to do all we can to prioritise our own mental wellbeing - especially when so many things are out of our control. Everyone reading this has permission to prioritise their mental health.

The Transition to Adulthood Programme oversees an Alliance of twelve charities focused on issues related to young adults. But every day I see a larger and growing alliance of people and organisations - an alliance spanning sectors, overcoming hurdles and creating spans much more widely and forms a rich picture of people who are helping drive momentum in this area.

We have to be grateful for all the ways probation colleagues, prison colleagues, charities, funders, delivery partners, policy officials and young adults with lived experience have contributed to bringing about changes the Trust couldn't dream of two decades ago.

I've been inspired by the Justice Select Committee Reports, best practice pilots, young adult focused strategies and guidance, young adult focused teams in various corners of the MoJ and HMPPS, transitions research projects and policy advocacy organisations run by young adults. A recent project which holds a lot of promise is the Newham Y2A Transitions Hub - a pilot providing bespoke young adult services and can stand as a blueprint for how probation can deliver world-class, effective support to young-adults. And I have long been in awe of how the Youth Justice Advisors Programme has developed - they're a group of young adults with lived experience offering advice and training to practitioners, and encouraging more inclusive practices.

We still have a long way to go, but there is a lot to be proud of. And everything was brought into existence by people who thought change was possible, and could see themselves meaningfully contributing to said change. You can't get anywhere without it.

I'm not paid to write about mindfulness though! So I'll close this with a few further insights on how we can all do more to support young adults and their unique needs:

- **Read up on the existing guidance on young adults**  
Equip and the My Learning Hub are great places to start - there you'll find two 7-minute briefings and the Next Steps Resource Pack. The [HMI Probation Evidence base](#) on Young Adults summarises the cohort's needs well and the [T2A website](#) has a wealth of resources too.

- **Use your first meetings with young adults to start building a relationship**

Imagine one of the worst things you've ever done. Something you feel guilty about, and has marked the way people see you or how you see yourself... Now imagine talking about it to a stranger with a clipboard. Imagine the reservations you'd have and the discomfort you'd feel. We've heard from Young Adults that they want to build relationships with their probation officers before they have to completely bare all. Meeting young adults before they're released and using earlier meetings to get to know them and their future plans would help hugely.

- **Use pro-social approaches**

(Excuse the jargon.) A pro-social approach encourages a 'shift in identity' - a shift away from a pro-offending identity (I'm a trouble-maker, disruptive, a risk), to a more positive one (a good musician, a good father or partner etc...)The building blocks for this are activities, positive interactions and responsibilities. Young adults want their time on probation to be spent looking forward, building on strengths and taking their lives forward. A summary of the approach can be found [here](#) and a handy toolkit [here](#).

- **Engage with the guidance, capability building sessions and 3rd sector agencies - and protect time for your staff to do the same**

Time is an invaluable resource at the moment. When managers role-model that they're engaging with guidance, sign-post it, encourage staff to engage and protect time in diaries, they've seen promising results. Clinks has a helpful [directory](#) of 3rd sector justice organisations who might be worth reaching out to too!

- **Learn from best practice in other areas and publicise best practice in your own area**

There's so much good work taking place but it can get stuck within an individual region. The more peer learning we have, the easier it is for regions to develop plans that stand a chance of making a difference, and we all avoid having to reinvent the wheel. It's why strong pilot evaluations and reports are so important - they mean a stronger case can be made for findings and best practice to be used in other regions or at a national scale. T2A can also help you publicise your findings.

- **Support your office and region to develop delivery plans and reporting structures**

Clear governance structures with clear remits and lines of communication go a long way in ensuring that progress stays on track, and everyone feels bought into common goals.

Lastly and crucially...

- **\*Employ and co-produce with young adults\***

Where possible, support young adults in articulating what they want to see done differently. This is relevant in terms of asking how they want their individual relationship with their officer to look like, as well as bringing together young adults to advise on strategic questions. Existing young adult advisory forums such as the [Youth Justice Advisors](#) and [Switchback's](#) Experts by Experience are great for this!

Happy dreaming!