

# Rehabilitating Youth Offenders in the UK by 2040: A Speculative Service Design Case Study

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The UK's youth justice system is currently challenged by high reoffending rates, systemic fragmentation, and the disproportionate impact on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As society evolves with growing technological and social changes, there is a need to reimagine rehabilitation strategies that are both effective and intentional. Through application of speculative and service design methodologies, this project envisions new pathways for youth rehabilitation in 2040 by exploring plausible future scenarios and mapping emerging risks. These approaches informed the creation of Turning Point, a cross-sector rehabilitation programme centred on trust-based mentorship, early intervention, and community reintegration. This case study demonstrates how speculative, and service design can support long-term thinking in public services by enabling institutions to become more proactive, human-centred, and resilient in the face of the future.

**Keywords:** *Speculative Design; Design Future; Future of Justice; Rehabilitation*

## 1 Introduction

The UK prison system is at a critical juncture. Since 1900, the prison population in England and Wales has quadrupled, reaching approximately 83,100 in 2023. Forecasts suggest this could rise to between 95,100 and 114,200 by 2027 (Sturge, 2024).<sup>e</sup>

Reoffending remains a persistent issue. For individuals serving under 12 months, the reoffending rate exceeds 50%, rising to 58% for those sentenced to fewer than six months. In contrast, suspended sentences with conditions result in a significantly lower reoffending rate of just 23% (Ministry of Justice, 2023). While the government has proposed reducing short-term custodial sentences in favour of GPS-monitored community alternatives, exceptions persist for repeat offenders and those who breach conditions.

Among children and young people (aged 10–17), the proven reoffending rate increased for the first time in decades, reaching 31.4% in the year ending December 2022 (Youth Justice Board & Ministry of Justice, 2024). Though they represent a small proportion of the overall prison population, youth offenders face disproportionately lasting and damaging consequences from early contact with the justice system.

According to the Children's Commissioner, many of these young people are "failed before they arrive", trapped in a cycle of disadvantage long before they are entering custody. Most come from

backgrounds marked by poverty, school exclusion, special educational needs, and poor mental health. Nearly 77% had been persistently or severely absent from school prior to custody (Children's Commissioner, 2024). Once in custody, access to consistent and quality education remains limited, compounding their marginalisation and hindering reintegration.

This project was developed within the Royal College of Art's MA Service Design programme, in collaboration with the UK Ministry of Justice, as part of Unit 2: Service Design Practice. It applies speculative and service design methods to develop and explore new pathways for youth rehabilitation in 2040. This case study asks: What might a future youth rehabilitation system look like if it were grounded not in punishment, but in trust, mentorship, and long-term care? In response, the project explores plausible future scenarios, systemic shifts, and the changing traits of youth offenders in the future. Project resulted in the speculative design of a rehabilitation programme called Turning Point. By constructing future visions and service prototypes, the project aims to support the Ministry of Justice in imagining more effective and anticipatory strategies to address youth offending in an evolving social landscape.

## **2 The Need for Future Speculation**

Youth justice in the United Kingdom represents a wicked problem shaped by overlapping systems, fragmented responsibilities, and competing values. Stakeholders: policy makers, practitioners, private contractors, and young people, operate with different timelines, risks, and definitions of justice. Traditional planning methods often struggle to hold this complexity or address long-term transformation. While service design and systemic design processes typically extract information from the past, operate in the present, and aim for result-oriented solutions in the near future, speculative design deliberately shifts this focus.

As Lin and Villari (2022) state, "Service design and systemic design processes extract information from the 'past,' design in the 'present,' and derive a result-oriented design solution for the near future. While speculative design primarily focuses on ideas placed in the future, it can inspire reflection, and through backcasting inform today's decision making. These reframing challenges linear, problem-solving logic and instead invites provocation, long-term visioning, and new ways of imagining societal transformation.

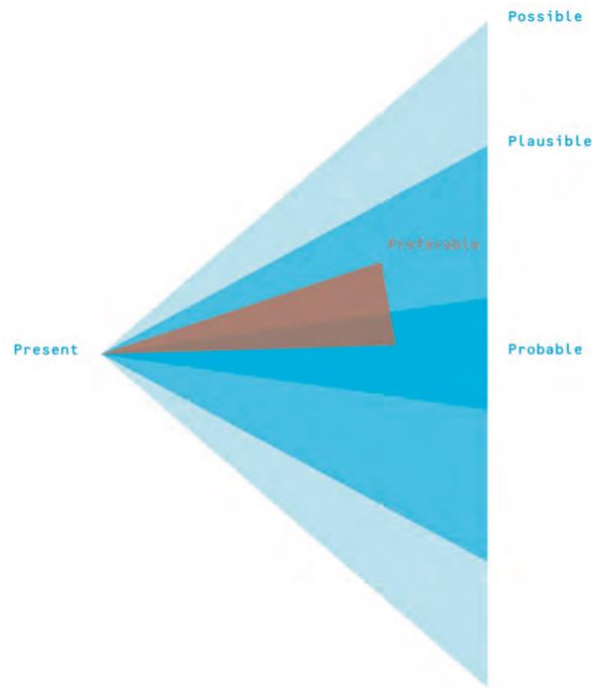


Figure 1. PPPP. Source: *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*.

Speculative design helps reframe these tensions by creating imagined futures that provoke critical questions and open space for new ethical reasoning (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Rather than suggesting fixed solutions, it invites dialogue about what kind of futures we are willing to shape and sustain. It enables designers to work with ambiguity and surface tensions that conventional policy approaches often overlook.

Speculative design lets designers explore and present new ideas for public systems and social values. By creating artefacts or visualisations that represent alternative civic arrangements, speculation enables both designers and the public to step outside current institutional constraints and consider what could be, rather than what already is. In doing so, it invites critical engagement with emerging issues, surfaces latent values, and fosters the collective imagining of systems and experiences that do not yet exist (DiSalvo, Jenkins, & Lodato, 2016).. As Auger (2013) describes speculative design as a method for building a “perceptual bridge” between fiction and reality, balancing imagination and plausibility to provoke debate and explore how emerging technologies or social dynamics might shape alternative presents or futures.

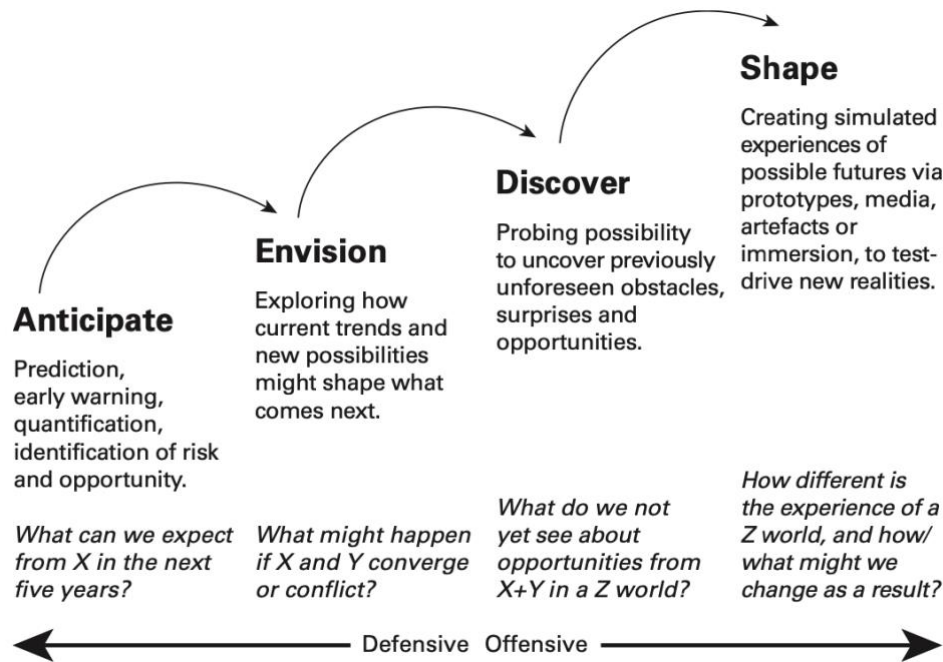


Figure 2. Level of Futuring. Source: How to future: Leading and sense-making in an age of hyperchange.

According to Smith and Ashby (2020), most strategies and service innovations stop at the “Anticipate” level, focused on prediction, mitigation, and quantification. But complex problems like youth justice demand higher levels of future engagement. It requires us to “Shape” to imagine lived scenarios that allow us to see new realities and confront change directly. This project adopts that position, using narrative and artefact to model alternative futures and provoke institutional imagination.

This work aligns with Rawls’s conception of justice as an evolving moral and political framework. “A conception of justice cannot be deduced from self-evident premises,” he writes, “its justification is a matter of the mutual support of many considerations” (Rawls, 1971). His idea of reflective equilibrium allows for ongoing revision of principles as society changes. He further notes, “The features of justice as fairness that make it a political conception also explain how it can gain support from and be interpreted in the light of different comprehensive doctrines”. This pluralism reinforces the need for future thinking to explore shifting values across time.

Reflective equilibrium requires that our principles of justice adapt as society evolves. Future thinking supports this adaptive capacity by surfacing early signals of change and connecting them to long-term visions. As societal shifts often occur gradually, speculative design and signal scanning can help designers detect weak signals and speculate their consequences. This enables us not only to imagine what the future might look like, but also to prepare, intervene, and shape it in more socially responsive ways.

### 3 Current State of Youth Offending in UK

A key insight we’ve uncovered through secondary research is that a large majority of individuals imprisoned by age 24, had first encountered the justice system before they turn 16. This statistic

reinforces the importance of early intervention, as not only to prevent escalation of offences but also to interrupt the established cycle of reoffending.

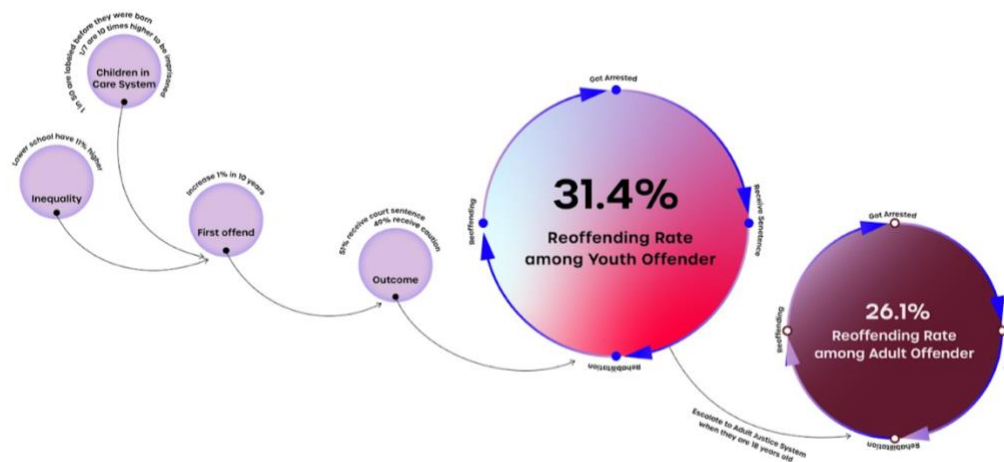


Figure 3. Stage of Youth Justice System in 2024.

Recent data also indicates a concerning shift in the profile of first-time entrants to the youth justice system. According to the Youth Justice Statistics 2022–2023, the number of child first-time entrants (FTEs) increased for the first time in a decade, rising by 1% to just under 8,400 (Ministry of Justice, 2024). While this remains the second lowest figure since records began, the reversal of a long-standing downward trend is notable.

The reason behind this spike in numbers can be traced to the inequalities embedded within current society. Children involved in the youth justice system have often faced more disadvantages during their childhood. According to the Office for National Statistics (2023), pupils attending schools rated as “requires improvement” or “inadequate” were approximately 11% more likely to receive a custodial sentence by age 24 than those in higher-rated schools, even when controlling for other background factors.

Without early and sustained intervention, many of these children become trapped in what is often described as a “revolving door” of reoffending and re-incarceration. Lacking adequate support, they cycle through short-term custodial sentences, temporary community orders, and institutional exclusions, none of which address the root causes of their behaviour or circumstances. Over time, this pattern solidifies. By the age of 18, a significant proportion of these young people have accumulated multiple convictions (YJB, 2023), and by their early twenties, they are statistically more likely to be serving longer custodial sentences (Prison Reform Trust, 2024) with limited access to rehabilitative support and fewer opportunities for reintegration. This trajectory reflects not individual failure, but the systemic failure to intervene meaningfully during early stages of vulnerability.

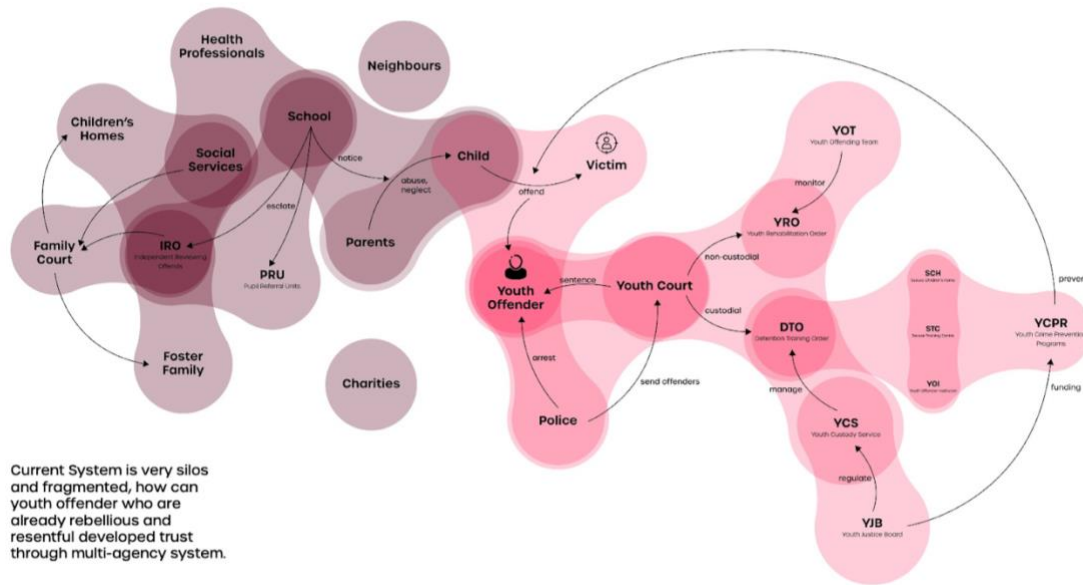


Figure 4. Stakeholder Map of Current Youth Justice System.

To further understand the complexity of the youth justice system and to uncover potential leverage points for our intervention, we conducted a stakeholder mapping exercise. We visualised the ecosystem of all the actors that are involved in the journey of a young person going through the justice system. A key finding from the exercise was the fragmented and isolated nature of the current actors within the youth justice system. This fragmentation often results in duplicated efforts and gaps in service delivery, which can cause confusion for young people navigating the multiple touchpoints. The Children's Commissioner (2023) has explicitly criticised this disjointed system, stating that critical opportunities are being missed to intervene early and address the root causes of offending. Advocacy groups, independent inspectors, and official reviews have consistently called for a shift away from punitive approaches toward models grounded in early intervention, trauma-informed care, and educational support (Prison Reform Trust, 2024; Children's Commissioner, 2023).

## 4 Future of Youth Rehabilitation

Building on the theory of speculative and service design, this project applied futuring methods within a co-creation environment to explore youth rehabilitation beyond near-term future. While earlier sections outlined the systemic functions of speculative design, this chapter focuses on its practical application, translating visions into tangible narratives and service artefacts. Drawing on futures frameworks that differentiate between immediate, transitional, and transformational change (Smith & Ashby, 2020), the project centred on envisioning far-future scenarios that provoke reflection and challenge entrenched institutional logics.

What will youth rehabilitation look like in a society increasingly shaped by automation, surveillance, and shifting notions of justice? What emerging social, technological, and institutional forces will influence how young people are supported or excluded by the justice system? How might future rehabilitation move beyond punishment toward care, mentorship, and systemic transformation? The

outcome included future scenarios, and a speculative service intervention called Turning Point, envisioning how youth justice might evolve by the year 2040.

#### 4.1 Signals of Change

Horizon scanning is a method for detecting early signals and long-term trends that may disrupt or reshape existing systems. It operates across six key domains: social, technological, economic, environmental, political, and values (STEEP), surfacing undercurrents often overlooked in conventional analysis. Rather than forecasting specific outcomes, it supports the development of plausible trajectories that help institutions engage with uncertainty (Smith and Ashby, 2020). In the context of youth justice, horizon scanning allows us to examine how emerging shifts, such as evolving moral norms, surveillance technologies, or changing public trust, could influence future approaches to rehabilitation. As Haidt (2012, p. 370) reminds us, “Moral matrices bind people together and blind them to the moralities of other matrices,” emphasizing that today’s norms may be challenged or reimagined in the future. Horizon scanning helps detect these early signals and, when paired with speculative design, can materialise potential futures to provoke reflection and guide present-day decision-making.

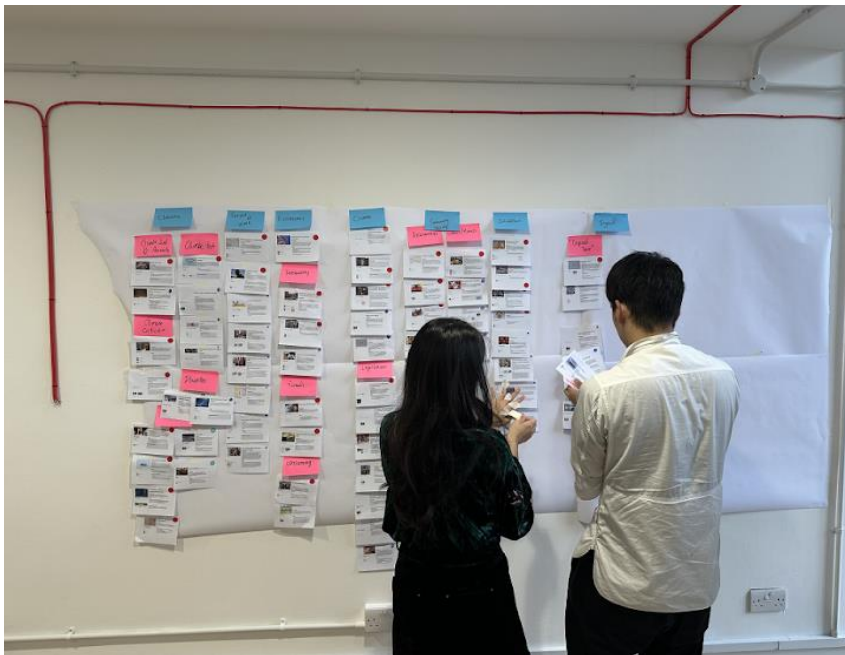


Figure 5. Horizon Scanning Workshop.

After conducting horizon scanning, we used the Three Horizons Mapping tool to explore how youth rehabilitation systems might evolve over time. This foresight tool differentiates between current dominant structures (Horizon One), emerging tensions and innovations (Horizon Two), and long-term transformative opportunities (Horizon Three). According to the UK Government’s Futures Toolkit, the method helps balance immediate priorities with future aspirations by identifying where continuity, adaptation, or disruption may shape strategic decisions (Cabinet Office, 2022). This approach allowed us to frame youth justice not just as a system in crisis, but as one placed within a dynamic landscape of potential change.



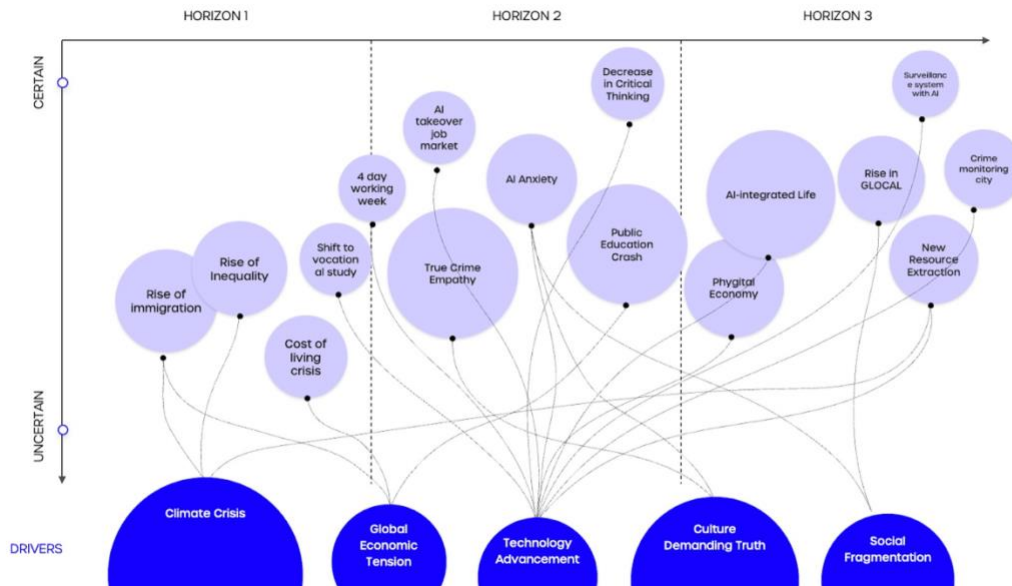


Figure 6. Three Horizons Mapping.

The horizon mapping process gave us a clear overview of how today's pressures may evolve into tomorrow's shifts. Certain trends, such as the rise of inequality, immigration, and the cost of living crisis, are already visibly shaping our lives and adding strain on public systems. These trends relate to deeper drivers like climate instability, global economic tensions, and growing societal fragmentation. At the same time, early signals point toward growing cultural and technological shifts. Rising anxiety over AI, declining trust in public services, and growing empathy driven by true crime media suggest a society's evolving moral compass.

In the future these tensions begin to reinforce into transformative changes. Speculative developments, such as AI-integrated lifestyles, phygital economies, and new modes of surveillance in urban environments, suggest a future in which systems of justice and rehabilitation may operate according to entirely different norms. This layered trajectory reinforces the importance of designing for long-term resilience, recognising that early signals often carry the seeds of profound institutional change.

## 4.2 Developing Future Scenario

### 4.2.1 Future Wheel

After synthesizing signals and identifying emerging trends through horizon scanning and driver mapping, we employed the Future Wheel framework to deepen our understanding of how these developments might shape youth justice in 2040. The Future Wheel is a visual foresight tool that enables the systematic exploration of the direct and indirect consequences of a central event or trend, making it especially effective for anticipating complex, interconnected futures (Cabinet Office, 2022; Smith & Ashby, 2020).

The process began by identifying a key driver and placing it at the centre of the Future Wheel. From there, we mapped primary effects like changes in sentencing or the use of digital evidence. These led to secondary consequences, such as shifting public trust or rising digital vigilantism. From there we were able to map Tertiary effects highlighted deeper societal shifts, such as new attitudes toward



justice or emerging forms of exclusion. This method helped reveal how one change can ripple through multiple layers, shaping both policy and lived experience.

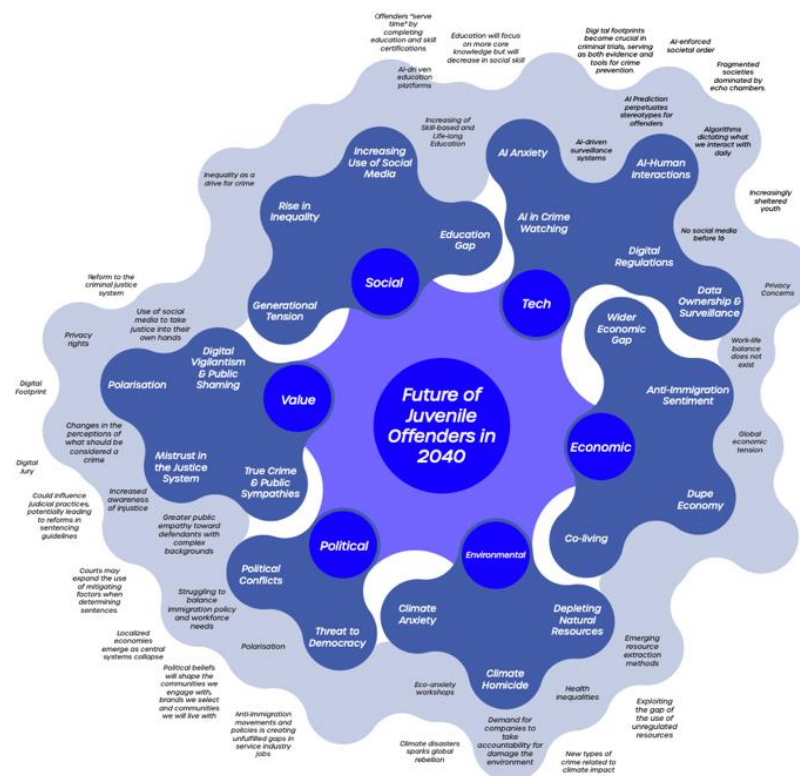


Figure 7. Future Wheel.

The Future Wheel helps translate signals from horizon scanning into connected ripples of impact, signalling their potential evolution into plausible future scenarios. In this way, we were able to trace the ripple effects of today's signals into the future, which revealed how interconnected technological, economic, and social changes might shape the landscape of youth justice. This approach ensures our scenarios are both grounded in evidence and expansive in their exploration of possible futures, supporting the design of interventions that are resilient, adaptive, and responsive to the complexities of 2040.

#### 4.2.2 Future Scenario

By 2040, the United Kingdom has become more diverse, automated, and digitally connected. Smart systems now manage public infrastructure, with cities responding to human activity in real time. Retail is fully automated, allowing customers to shop without queues or checkouts. Yet efficiency has not eliminated inequality. Housing remains a key pressure point, with multigenerational living now the norm. Privacy is limited to personal devices and headphones.

Work patterns have changed. Although a four-day work week is standard, many people maintain side jobs, often from home. This has further blurred the line between domestic and professional life and left little time for rest, particularly for the working class.

As both parents work two jobs and become more busy, artificial intelligence plays a major role in caregiving. AI reads stories, filters content, and supports homework. After widespread teacher resignations, public education became fully virtual. One teacher may now instruct across ten schools, supported by AI grading and feedback. Lessons are consistent but increasingly detached.

In response to rising concerns over online safety, policy now prohibits social media access for those under 16. While this regulation offers some protection, it has also led many young people to enter digital spaces later, often unprepared, socially isolated, and vulnerable to manipulation. Bullying and peer pressure have shifted into digital environments, where adolescents may feel coerced into transferring money via digital wallets. AI companions, designed for personalisation, often reinforce existing beliefs, and when paired with reduced critical thinking and centralised education systems, contribute to insular digital experiences. Generative AI can amplify rumours, rapidly producing convincing synthetic content, such as images or videos, that spreads widely before it can be challenged or corrected.

Crime has not disappeared; it has adapted. Digital tools enable new forms of shoplifting, identity fraud, and deception. In response, the justice system has adopted AI policing and digital juries that factor in public sentiment. Digital footprints become primary evidence in investigations.

If formal systems struggle to keep pace, public frustration fuels digital vigilantism. Offenders are exposed online, and reputational damage becomes lasting. Although services are faster, the policies still remain reactive. Youth justice in 2040 reflects broader societal tensions, it has become more efficient yet increasingly fails to foster human interaction and a sense of belonging.



Figure 8: Scenario in 2024 (<https://youtu.be/36Q-Wu-X6yo>).

# How the future developed from today

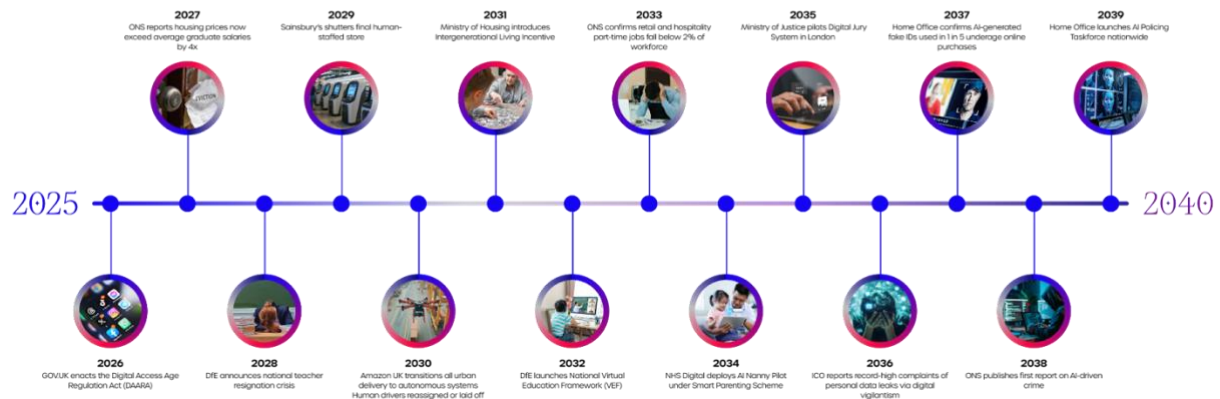


Figure 9. Future Backcasting.

## 4.2.3 Future Persona

To deepen the emotional and experiential dimensions of our speculative scenario, we developed future personas, narrative representations of imagined individuals living in 2040. While traditional personas reflect current or near-future users, extending this method into longer-term futures enables exploration of how people might behave, what they may value, and the kinds of challenges they could encounter in emerging societal contexts (Lindley, Sharma, & Potts, 2014). Future personas help translate abstract foresight into more tangible insights, enabling both designers and stakeholders to engage with complex futures through personal, human-centred narratives (Candy & Dunagan, 2017, p. 145).

For this project, we developed two personas, Nova, a 16-year-old foster home runaway using tech skills to survive, and Qynn, a teenager overwhelmed by sudden digital exposure. Through Nova and Qynn, we explored how digital footprints, social fragmentation, and mistrust of authorities could shape the lived experiences of young offenders. (see fig. 10).



Figure 10. Future Persona.

Embedding future personas in our process allowed us to translate abstract trends into lived realities. Nova and Qynn made the risks of digital exclusion, social isolation, and systemic mistrust tangible, helping stakeholders empathise with the real challenges youth may encounter. Their stories enabled us to test whether proposed interventions would address the needs and vulnerabilities of future young offenders, rather than simply responding to present-day cases.

#### 4.2.4 Future Artifacts

As part of the speculative design process, we developed future artefacts to materialise key elements of the 2040 scenario. These artefacts serve as tangible expressions of possible systems, technologies, and social practices, allowing audiences to engage with the future in a grounded yet imaginative way. Following Auger (2013), such design speculation relies on the creation of a “perceptual bridge” that connects audiences’ current realities with fictional elements. By drawing on familiar cues—visual styles, language, or interaction patterns, future artefacts can provoke reflection, emotional response, and critical engagement with what these imagined futures imply for justice, care, and society.

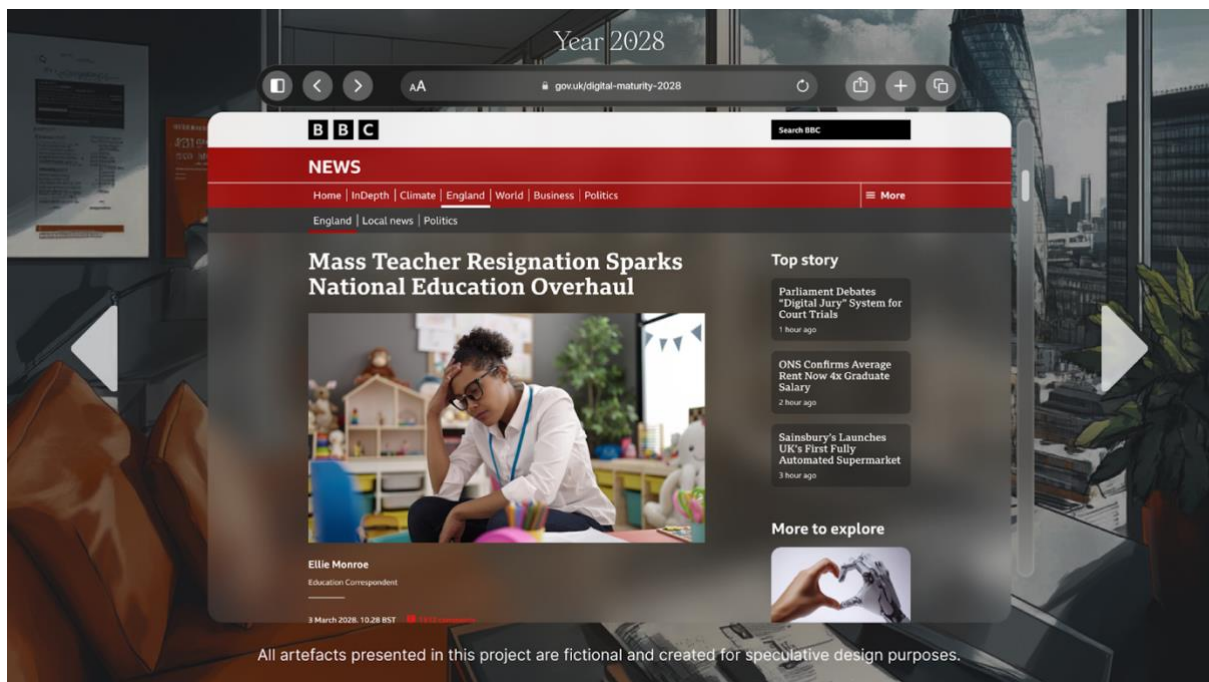


Figure 11. Future Artefact of 2028 News.

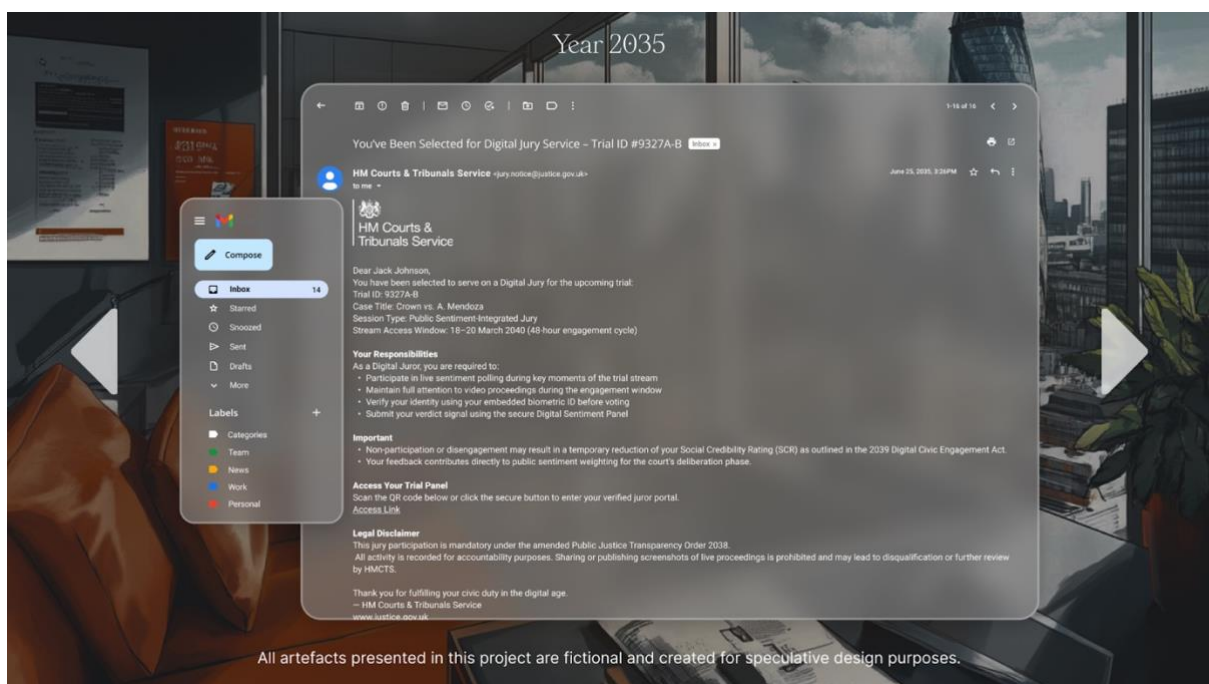




Figure 12. Future Artefact of Digital Jury Summoning Letter.

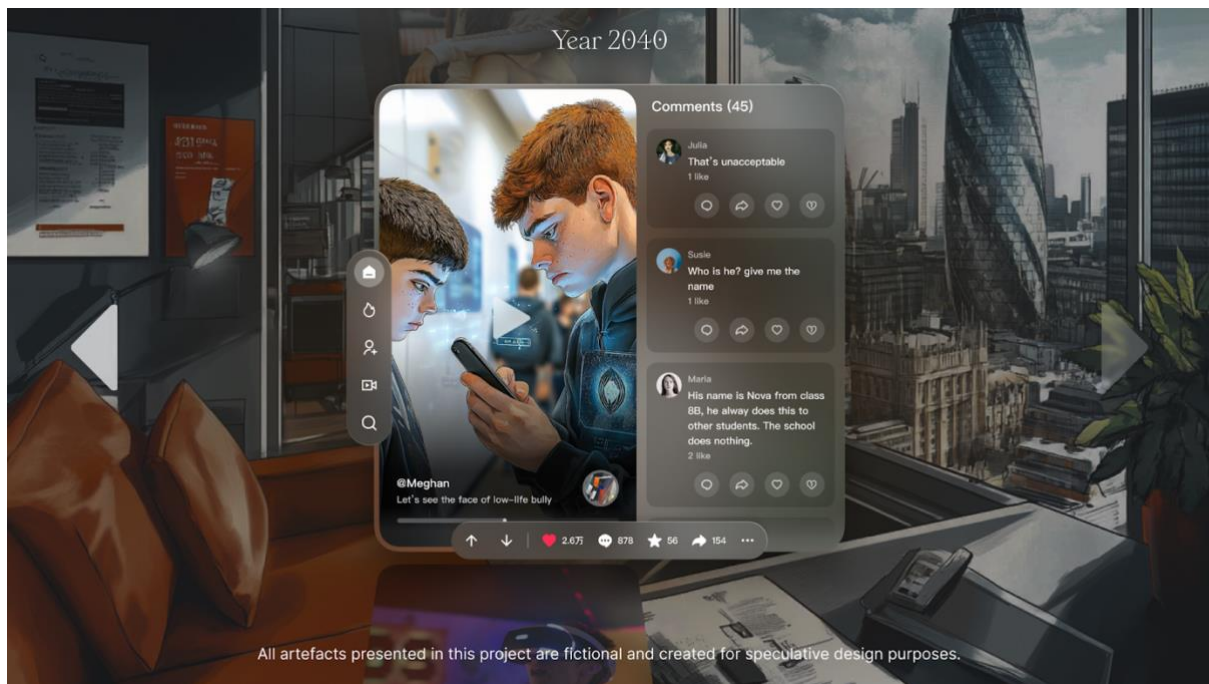


Figure 13. Future Artefact of Teen Bullying Exposure.

### 4.3 Theory of Change

Building on the developed scenarios and speculative artefacts, the project transitions into a service design phase, beginning with a Theory of Change. A Theory of Change is a structured methodology for planning and evaluating complex interventions. It articulates how and why desired change is expected to occur within a given context by mapping a sequence of outcomes linked by causal logic, underlying assumptions, and measurable indicators (UNDG, 2017; Nesta, 2025). In this project, the Theory of Change serves as a bridge between foresight and design, translating future-oriented visions into a coherent strategy for youth rehabilitation that can be tested, adapted, and scaled within existing systems.

To initiate the Theory of Change, we first constructed a Hypothesis Stack to surface the layered assumptions underlying the envisioned future of youth rehabilitation.

**Trusted-based  
Mentorship Program lead**

**Incorporate both  
human-digital support**

**Put Human back to  
interaction**

**Self-discovery**

Establishing Consistency	
<b>IF ...</b> youth offenders are matched with a buddy who provides long-term support throughout their rehabilitation journey,	<b>THEN ...</b> They will receive the guidance needed to navigate reintegration and benefit from a trusted relationship that reduces stigma and promotes social acceptance.
Meeting Basic Needs	
<b>IF ...</b> the supporting system prioritises fulfilling youth offenders' basic needs –such as housing, employment, and health,	<b>THEN ...</b> offenders will have the stability and mental clarity required to reflect on their actions and plan for a better future.
Involving the Community	
<b>IF ...</b> The rehabilitation process actively involves community members through collaborative initiatives	<b>THEN ...</b> community bias will decrease, trust will rebuild, and offenders will feel a stronger sense of belonging and self-worth.
Mental Health Support and Reflection	
<b>IF ...</b> youth offenders participate in mental health support and structured reflection workshops	<b>THEN ...</b> they will better understand the impact of their actions, prepare to accept societal stigma, and begin their journey toward personal accountability.

Figure 14. Hypothesis Stacks.

This figure outlines key "if-then" hypotheses across the proposed intervention, framing how consistent mentorship, basic needs fulfilment, community engagement, and mental health support collectively contribute to sustained behavioural and systemic transformation.

Building on the hypotheses, we developed a Theory of Change to illustrate the causal logic linking our interventions to intended outcomes and long-term impact. The model visualises five key activities, ranging from buddy matching to future visioning, that together aim to support youth offenders' journey from marginalisation to reintegration. These interventions seek to foster equity by meeting basic needs, promote personal accountability through reflection, and cultivate motivation for future planning. Together, these outcomes contribute to a reduced risk of reoffending, greater social integration, and the pursuit of a more meaningful life.

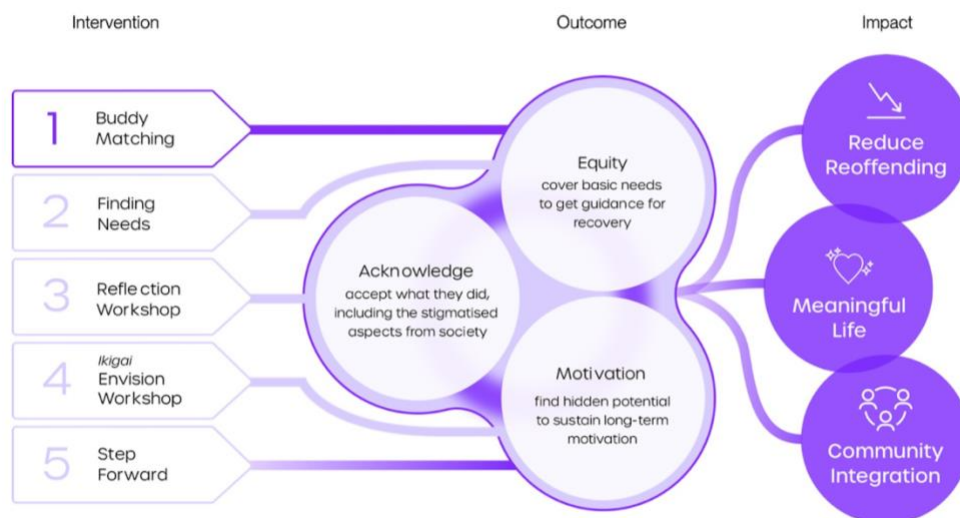


Figure 15. Theory of Change.

The diagram illustrates a pathway from intervention to impact in a youth rehabilitation programme. It begins with five core interventions: Buddy Matching, Finding Needs, Reflection Workshop, Ikigai Envision Workshop, and Step Forward. These activities are designed to produce three interconnected outcomes. These outcomes collectively aim to generate long-term impacts of reducing reoffending, enabling meaningful life trajectories, and strengthening community integration. The model emphasises that personal transformation is supported through both relational and structural support mechanisms.

#### **4.4 Turning Point - A Speculative Rehabilitation Programme**

Drawing on the insights generated through horizon scanning, scenario building, and the development of future personas, it became clear that future rehabilitation efforts must address not only systemic fragmentation but also the emotional and relational disconnection experienced by young people. As institutions grow increasingly digitised and human interaction declines, trust becomes both more fragile and more essential. For a resentful teenager navigating a highly automated justice system, the challenge is not only compliance but connection. Designing for future rehabilitation therefore demands interventions that can bridge institutional silos while also fostering relational trust, rebuilding a sense of care, presence, and support within a system that risks becoming impersonal by design.

The Turning Point is conceptualised as a human-first, cross-sector rehabilitation programme that prioritises meaningful relationships within an increasingly digital justice landscape. While leveraging digital tools, its core emphasis is on restoring trust through mentorship, continuity of care, and face-to-face interaction. The programme provides holistic, adaptive, and sustained support, accompanying young people from their first contact with the justice system through to long-term reintegration. It aims to bridge fragmented services and institutional silos to ensure no young person navigates rehabilitation in isolation.

Mentorship is central to the programme's delivery. Mentors receive formal training and certification, and all activities are carried out under robust safeguarding protocols. The programme is designed specifically for first-time youth offenders and is fully compliant with UK safeguarding legislation, including the Children Act 1989 and 2004, Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE, 2023), and Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023). These measures ensure the safety, dignity, and rights of young people remain protected throughout their rehabilitation journey.

Structured as an intensive 1–3 month programme, The Turning Point facilitates collaboration between justice, education, health, and social care agencies. Each participant is paired with a dedicated mentor—either a trained professional or certified community volunteer—who supports their journey through four sequential stages:

- 1. Stability & Supports**

This foundational stage will address participants' immediate needs, including housing, access to healthcare, and emotional well-being. By removing structural barriers that often contribute to cycles of reoffending, this stage establishes the conditions necessary for effective rehabilitation. A key component is the mentor's role in facilitating the participant's transition, this includes supporting their acclimatisation to a host family environment, ensuring both stability and a sense of belonging at the earliest point in the programme.



## 2. Reflection & Accountability

Participants will be required to participate in AI-powered socratic conversation to understand the consequences of their action and open up their mind. The AI will be personalised based on the offender profile.

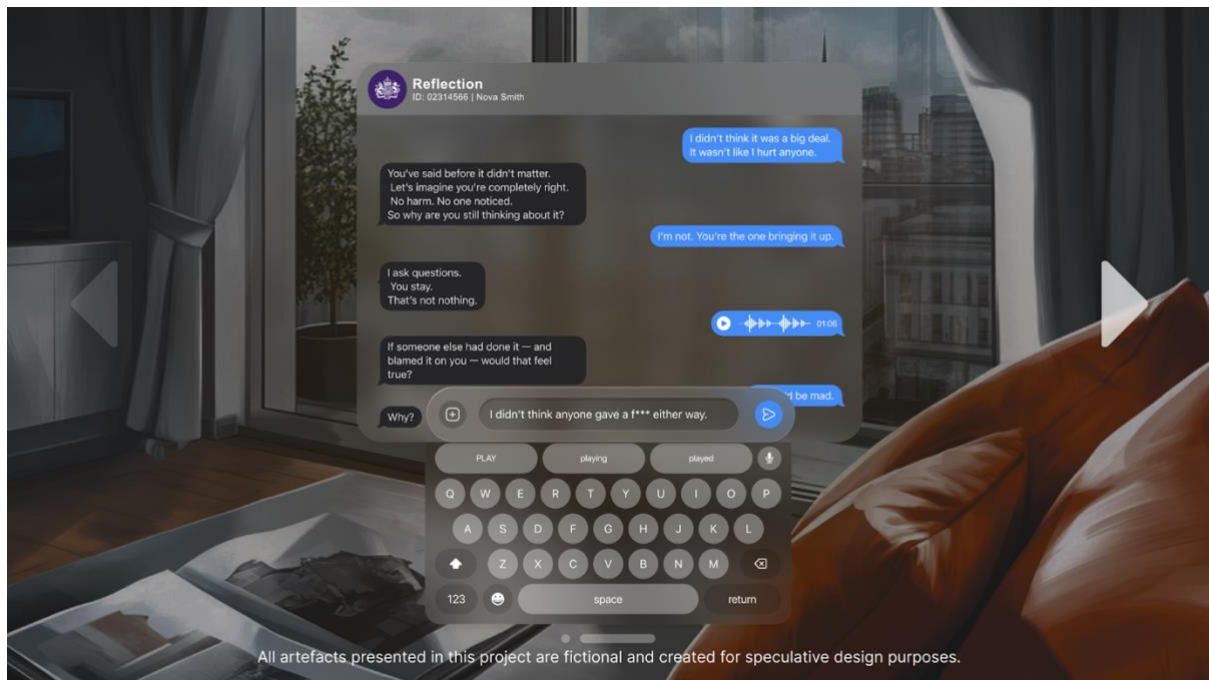


Figure 16. Future Artefact of AI-powered Socratic Conversation.

## 3. Future Vision & Goal Setting

Participants will engage in an Ikigai workshop designed to help them articulate a meaningful and desirable future. This reflective process encourages young people to explore their passions, strengths, and values, translating them into concrete life goals. These aspirations are then actualised through hands-on projects and mentorship opportunities, supported by programme sponsors and partner organisations. To ensure scalability and personalisation, the programme integrates AI-powered modules that adapt content and support to each participant's needs, learning style, and progress.

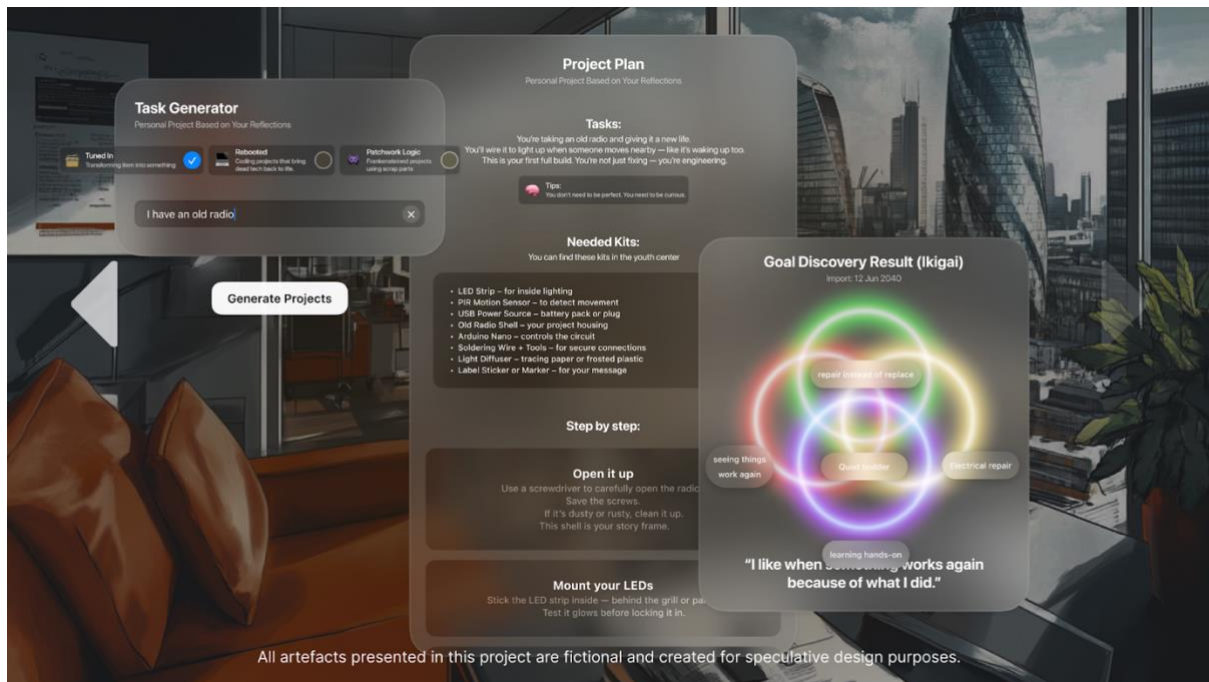


Figure 17. Future Artefact of Ikigai Result and AI-Generated Project Brief.

#### 4. Community Reintegration

Community Reintegration focuses not only on preparing participants for re-entry into society but also on shifting public perception. As part of this stage, the programme will host an Open Day, where success stories are shared with the broader community, allowing the public to come see the changes made by participants. This visibility helps reduce stigma, fosters empathy, and reinforces the legitimacy of second chances in youth rehabilitation.

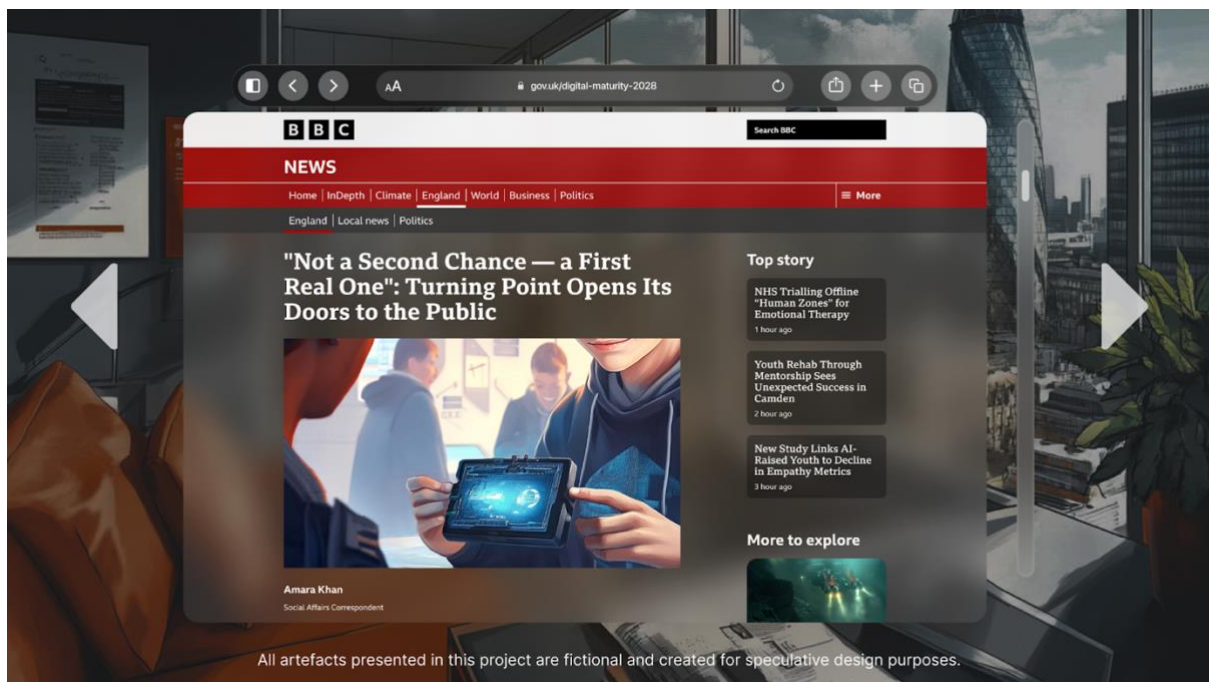


Figure 18. Future Artefact of Open Day's News.

This structure is underpinned by the belief that genuine and reliable human mentorship is essential for meaningful rehabilitation, particularly in a future where digital surveillance and AI-driven justice risk eroding trust and personal connection.

## SERVICE BLUEPRINT : TURNING POINT REHABILITATION PROGRAM (2040)

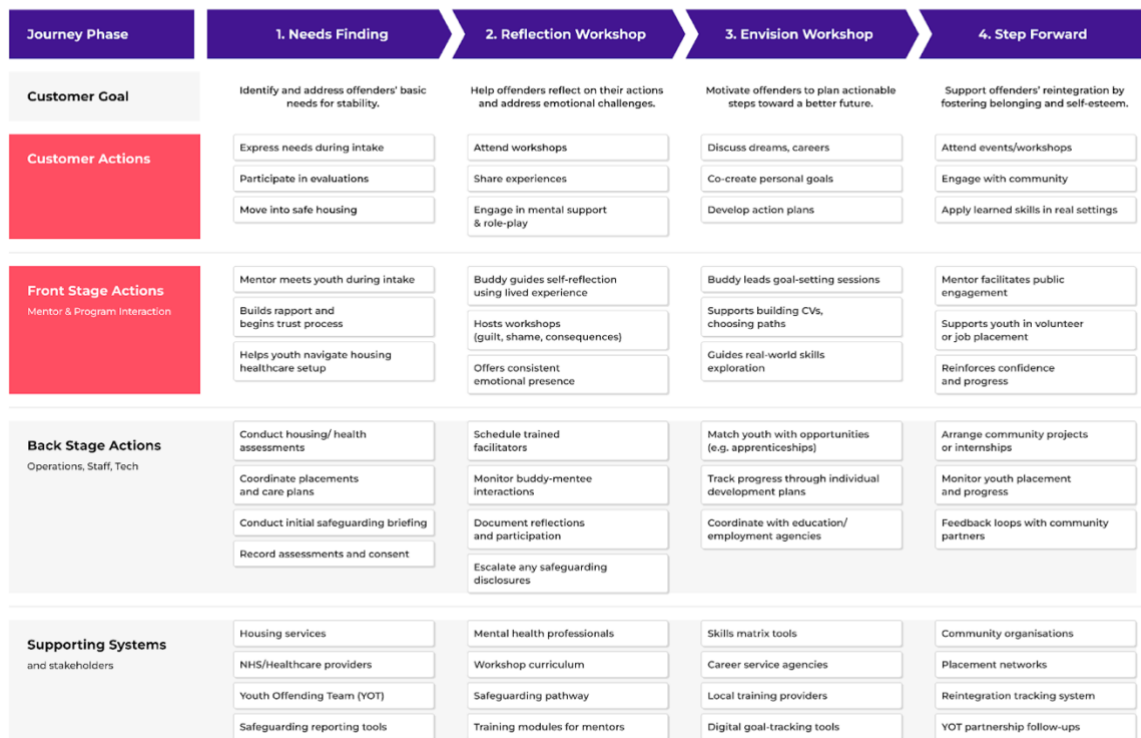


Figure 19. Turning Point's Service Blueprint.

## 5 Reflection

This project demonstrates the unique potential of combining speculative design and future thinking within the context of youth justice. The speculative process worked well, enabling us to identify weak signals and envision how societal shifts, such as increasing AI surveillance, shifting moral norms, and education clashes, might shape youth offending and rehabilitation in 2040. However, while the method allowed us to break free from present-day constraints, the future scenarios we created were often more nuanced than strictly preferable. Given the sensitive subject matter, criminality, punishment, and redemption, our futures necessarily balanced dystopian trajectories (e.g., decline of public education, AI-integrated surveillance) with hopeful elements (e.g., empathy-driven culture, restorative practices inspired by true crime discourse).

This project also conveys the value of speculative design in policymaking and systems innovation. It reinforced the idea that offending behaviour is not a fixed pathology but something that evolves in response to societal conditions. As Rawls suggests, justice is an evolving political conception, our work illustrates how values such as accountability, trust, and belonging might be reinterpreted in the future. We also echo criminological thought that there is no society without crime; the question is how that society chooses to respond.

As a service design project, this work underscores the importance of integrating future-oriented value shifts into the design of public systems. Institutions like the Ministry of Justice can begin to prepare for emerging sociotechnical events in order to respond effectively to long-term change. Our approach demonstrates how service design can contribute to strategic foresight by visualising future needs, surfacing latent ethical questions, and prototyping alternative service models. The Ministry of Justice, in particular, must take a more proactive role in shaping policy that prepares for the challenges of tomorrow, rather than simply reacting to them.

Finally, ethical considerations were central throughout. Working with a theme as sensitive as youth justice required continual grounding in safeguarding principles and awareness of power dynamics. While our work was speculative, it was informed by real vulnerabilities. We avoided sensationalising or oversimplifying the lived experiences of young offenders and instead aimed to humanise and complexify their futures. Designing for vulnerable populations is not only a creative challenge, but also a moral responsibility.

## **6 Conclusion**

This project explored how speculative and service design can be used together to rethink the future of youth rehabilitation. It shows that speculative design can support long-term thinking in public services by helping us imagine what new systems, values, and responsibilities might look like.

Our findings support the idea that justice evolves alongside societal change, and that justice systems should become more proactive in anticipating future needs. Speculative design can help make policy more responsive and human-centred by opening up space to explore what new responsibilities, relationships, and forms of care might emerge. Rather than offering fixed solutions, this project aimed to raise better questions about how accountability and rehabilitation could take shape in the future.

Because of the time frame and ethical considerations, we were not able to co-design directly with young people affected by the system. In future work, researchers could test how speculative design can be used with young people and frontline workers to co-create new service ideas. It would also be useful to follow how speculative ideas influence actual planning or decisions in public agencies like the Ministry of Justice.

Finally, this approach could be applied across other complex systems such as housing, health, or education, where speculative service design can act as a catalyst, helping policymakers adopt a more proactive and future-ready mindset.

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