

# The Role of Key Workers: Supporting CYP Affected by Serious Youth Violence

17th March 2025



# Agenda

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**The purpose** of this session is to discuss the findings from our research into the role of key workers in supporting children and young people who have been affected by serious youth violence. The qualitative research was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF).

Item	Time
Background and methodology	15:00
Key findings	15:10
Q&A	15:40

# This work sits in the context of the DfE and YEF wider programme of research into serious youth violence and sought to add to the evidence base on how CYP affected by serious youth violence can be effectively supported by professionals

## Background and context

This work sits in the context of the DfE and Youth Endowment Fund's (YEF) wider programme of research into serious youth violence (SYV). The DfE-YEF SYV research programme aims to better understand how children and young people (CYP) access, navigate and engage with systems of support and how their experiences may protect them from or expose them to SYV as victims and/or perpetrators.

## This research sought to answer:

- How can different key worker models be implemented effectively in the context of reducing SYV and when supporting diverse groups of CYP with lived experience of SYV?
- How can key workers build trust with young people affected by SYV?
- What role do they play in bridging the gap between young people and vital support services?
- What are the perceived impacts of having a key worker on outcomes strongly associated with SYV? How can the impact be better recognised and measured?

# Crest conducted 48 interviews with key workers, managers of key workers and children and young people

To support the comprehensiveness of our research and ensure that it best captures the operational reality of the delivery of support by key workers to CYP who have experienced SYV, we carried out **qualitative engagement across England** with a range of stakeholders. Our approach to qualitative engagement was underpinned by our **evidence review and ethics framework**.

## Totals



We held discussions with **25 children and young people** across England.

## Location

We spoke to children and young people across **4 regions**: North East, North West, Yorkshire, and London.

## Gender

We spoke to **5 female** and **20 male** children and young people.

## Age

CYP were **aged between 12-18**.

10-12: 1  
13-14: 12  
15-16: 6  
17-18: 6

## Support

We spoke to **18 CYP with** a key worker, and **7 CYP without** a key worker.

## Ethnicity

We did not capture data on CYP ethnicity as part of this research.



We held discussions with **25 key workers and managers** of key workers across England.

We spoke to key workers and managers across **5 regions**: North East, North West, West Midlands, Yorkshire, and London.

## Roles

We spoke with **key workers and professionals in a range of roles**, including: Head of Year, Youth Justice Worker, Mentor, Emergency Department Navigator, Youth Worker, Youth Practitioner, Chief Executive, Children and Families Development Manager, Designated Safeguarding & Early Help Lead. In addition, we spoke to CYP supported by an ESL teacher and Isolation Manager.

## Children and young people were at the heart of this research, and we took steps to ensure that young people were meaningfully engaged and rewarded

**The mobilisation phase set up the project to support the positive engagement of children and young people.** Our ethics framework underpins the approach to youth engagement, including how to manage risks and any safeguarding concerns. In addition, all researchers engaging with CYP were trained in trauma-informed qualitative engagement.

**Co-design means that children and young people have been directly involved in the design of research materials and outputs.** Five children and young people, aged 12 to 15, male and female, with and without key workers, engaged in a co-design session to draft the discussion topic guide. Ahead of publication, children and young people were asked to reflect on the findings in another co-design session.

**Recruitment materials were tailored to be child-friendly.** Crest developed tailored posters to be placed in locations where key workers support young people, and to be shared directly with young people. The posters used age-appropriate language to describe the purpose of the research, what their involvement would look like, and the benefits of getting involved.

**Interviews were conducted in a flexible and child-centred manner.** Semi-structured interviews enabled researchers to ask questions which suited individual children and young people. In addition, we held interviews in person and online based on the individual's preference.

**Children and young people were rewarded for their contributions.** Researchers clearly explained the benefits of engaging with young people, including developing their interviews skills and contributing to a published report. In addition, all young people received a £25 voucher to a shop of their choice.

"I feel very confident with how you have approached the engagement. You have made sure that the questions are appropriate for our young people through co-design. A lot of external organisations do not take such a thoughtful approach to youth engagement." - **Key worker**

# Key findings and your reflections

# The role of a key worker is well understood and the functions of a key worker are widely agreed upon. However, the term itself is not always used

**'Key worker':** A **trusted professional** in a child's life who is responsible for **coordinating support** across **different services**, such as health, education, and youth justice.



Our engagement highlighted that **the term 'key worker' is not regularly used by practitioners or CYP**. Instead, synonyms are used.

## Why use alternative terms to 'key worker'?

Practitioners and CYP explained that the term 'key worker' reminds them of a healthcare professional, and therefore can be confusing in other contexts. 'Key worker' is also reminiscent of the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore can have negative connotations as it reminds young people of a time when restrictions such as limited time outside were placed on them

## Synonyms for 'key worker':

- youth worker
- mentor
- case manager
- case worker
- facilitator
- support worker
- outreach worker
- peer worker
- youth practitioner

The term 'key worker' can refer to many professions across systems of support. Not all professions specifically focus on SYV, but may focus on vulnerabilities related to SYV

Systems of support	Education	Health	Crime and justice	Social care	Community
	SENCO	Substance misuse outreach worker	Youth Offending Team case manager	Social worker	Youth worker
	ESL Teacher	ED key workers	Probation officer	Foster carer	Mentor
	Head of Year	Pediatrician	Independent Child Trafficking Guardian	Residential care worker	Outreach worker
	AP Teacher	Counsellor		Housing worker	Employers
	Isolation manager			Personal advisors for care leavers	
	Attendance mentors				

Key:

Statutory
Non-statutory
SYV-specific



# From our analysis of interviews with children and young people, key workers and managers, we have pulled together the key attributes of key workers

## Empathetic and non-judgemental

"He actually listens. He just doesn't sit there and look like he's listening." *CYP*

## Emotionally resilient

"You have to be able to manage your own emotions, and fears and worries and concerns." *Manager*

## Lived experience

## Authentic

"Having a genuine interest in young people." - *Key worker*

## Self-awareness

"Key workers should be self-aware and reflective about their own experiences and how these might impact their work." *Key worker*

## Motivated

"We go above and beyond." - *Key worker*

## Collaboration



## Professional curiosity

"There might be issues that are not immediately visible. For example, they punched a wall. But actually, you begin to realise after working with them, it's actually not anger, it's other things that they are facing." - *Key worker*

## Adaptability

"You have to be flexible with them. You have to be understanding." - *Key worker*

Key:

Relationship-building

Skills and experience

# We asked children and young people to describe their key worker in three words

**Helpful, intelligent, comfortable**

Male, 17, supported by a YJS worker

**Calm, responsible, a great person**

Male, 16, supported by a Youth worker

**Funny, nice, smart**

Male, 18, supported by a Youth worker

**Funny, nice, supportive**

Male, 13, supported by a Mentor

**Understanding, caring, motherly**

Male, 16, supported by a Year Manager

**Confident, hardworking, funny**

Male, 14, supported by a Youth worker

**Good role model**

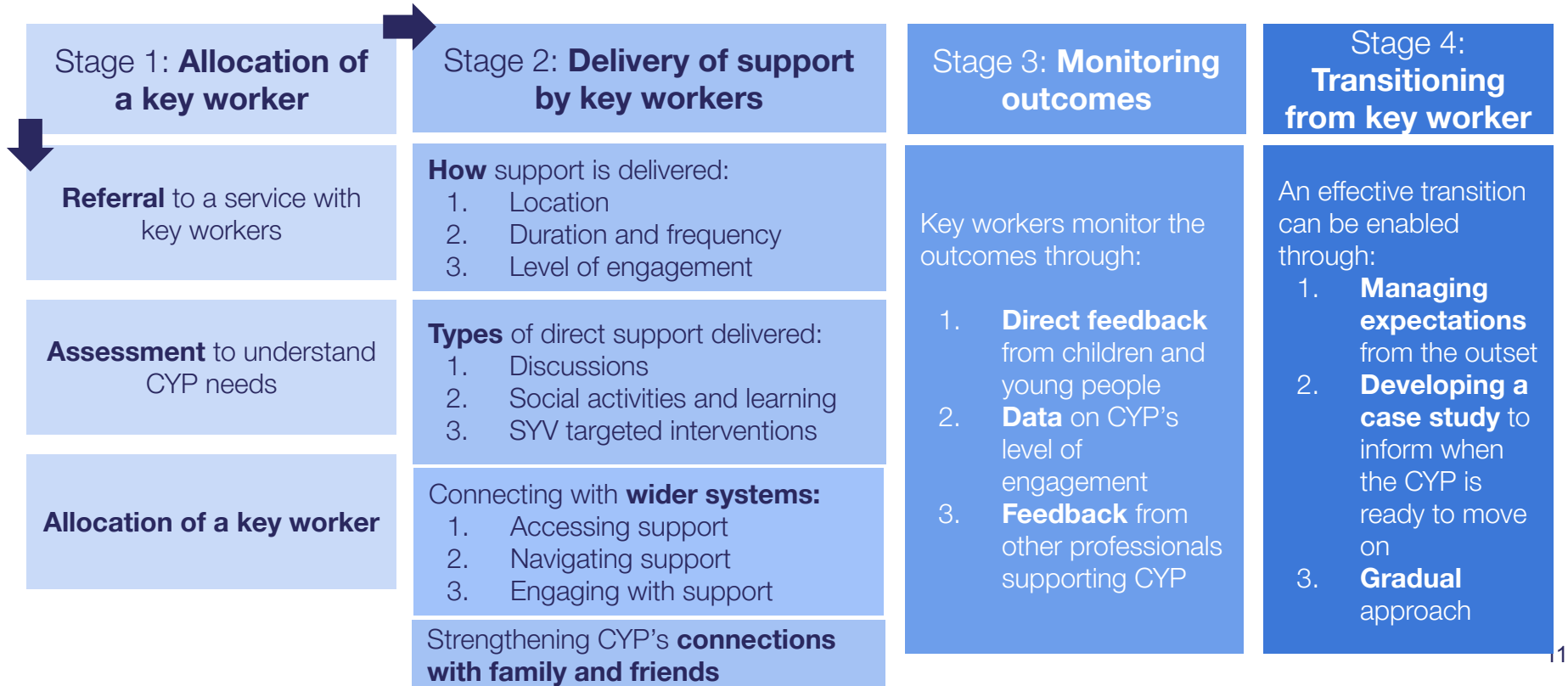
Male, 17, supported by a Mentor



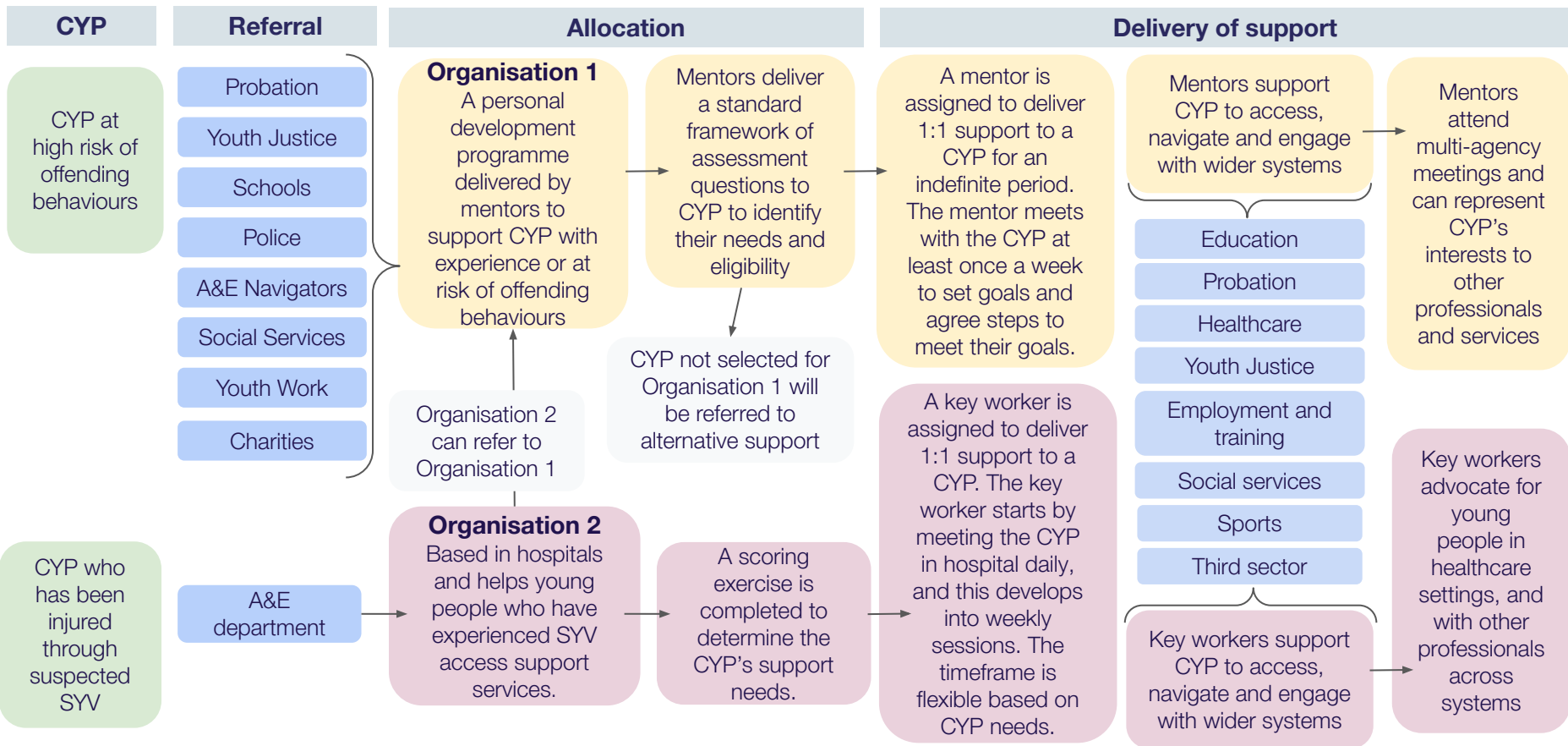
**Beautiful, kind, sweet**

Female, 13, supported by a Youth worker

# This research has identified a four stage approach of delivery by key workers to support CYP and reduce their vulnerability. Together, these stages amount to the key worker model



# Our deep dive highlighted how a key worker model operates locally to support children and young people who have experienced serious youth violence



# The delivery of support to CYP by key workers is enabled by key worker level factors and organisation level factors

## Key worker level enablers

Tailored support

Co-production with CYP

Setting clear boundaries with CYP

Consistent and reliable support to CYP

Goals and reward focused

Accessibility and appropriate language

Transparency

Thinking outside of the box

## Key worker level barriers

Over-reliance on individual staff

Social media

Wrong time for the CYP to accept and receive support

“My key worker suggested listening to meditative music... which has been helpful in managing my social anxiety and behaviour” - CYP

# The delivery of support to CYP by key workers is also enabled and hindered by organisational and external factors

## Organisation level factors

Training and resources

Staff wellbeing

Supervision and reflective practice

Resourcing to meet the needs of CYP

## External level factors

Availability of support services for CYP

Right time for the CYP to accept and receive support

Mistrust of services and professionals

Length of commissioning cycles

## Partnership working: enablers and barriers

### Enablers:

- Early partnership working
- Effective information sharing
- Long-term funding cycles

### Challenges:

- Competition for funding
- Limited understanding of key worker role

# Measuring the impact of key worker support to CYP is difficult, resulting in a lack of comparisons or transferable best practice

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## Measurement challenges

**Diversion of resources away from supporting the CYP**

**Variance in data collection and reporting requirements**

**Difficulty in comparing individual CYP with different needs and goals**

**Challenges in isolating the impact of key worker support**

# Both the children and young people and key workers discussed the perceived impact key workers can have on outcomes related to involvement in serious violence

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Reduction in offending

Development of sense of self

Improved engagement with  
CJS professionals

Reduction in hospital  
admittance

Social skills and managing  
relationships

Community engagement

Accessing employment  
opportunities

Access to healthcare

Behavioural and emotional  
regulation

School engagement

“It makes me feel proud of myself, but at the same time grateful for the people that supported me. I feel like if it wasn't for [key worker] I wouldn't improve my behaviour.” - CYP



# Case study: How the delivery of support by a key worker has impacted the CYP's vulnerability to SYV

<b>Admission to hospital following a SYV incident</b>	A CYP presented at a hospital with injuries from peer on peer knife violence. The CYP described feeling scared, confused, and their mood was down. There was also tension between the CYP and their mum following the incident.
<b>Developing a trusted relationship</b>	The A&E Navigator attended the young person in hospital. They started by developing a positive relationship with the CYP, who said this was the first time they had laughed in weeks. The Navigator went out to get the young person their favourite food, which helped to improve the young person's mood and comfort level. The Navigator also recognised some tension between the CYP and their mum and helped them to see eye to eye by mediating a discussion.
<b>Navigating and engaging healthcare</b>	In the hospital, the Navigator supported the CYP and their mum to understand what was going to happen next by explaining the healthcare system.
<b>1:1 key worker support</b>	Once the CYP was discharged from the hospital, the Navigator delivered one-to-one sessions to them. These sessions supported the young person emotionally by discussing the SYV incident and considering how to move forward. The key worker also supported the CYP practically by accompanying them outside in their community to help overcome their concerns around their personal safety.
<b>Reducing vulnerability to violence</b>	The Navigator has encouraged the young person to set positive personal goals. One goal set by the CYP is to improve their football skills. The young person has since joined a football academy and trains daily. This has been a positive influence on the CYP, who has ambitions to play professional football.

# Q&A

# Thank you

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