



Department  
for Education

**verian** 



# **Schools' response to knife crime in schools**

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## Glossary

**Knife crime incident:** this report follows YEF's definition of knife crime incidents to be "any crime involving a knife or other bladed or pointed object, such as screwdrivers, razors or broken bottles. This could involve assaulting or stabbing someone, threatening them to steal something or carrying a knife or a bladed/pointed object."<sup>1</sup>

**Strategic lead:** staff in the senior leadership team within schools, including head teachers, deputy head teachers and designated safeguarding leads.

**Delivery group staff:** teaching staff, pastoral staff and special educational needs coordinators, who did not have a role in the senior leadership team within the school.

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<sup>1</sup> [Knife crime | Youth Endowment Fund](#)

## Executive Summary

As part of the Department for Education's (DfE) serious violence research programme, DfE commissioned Verian to conduct qualitative research with schools and school leaders to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which schools identify and respond to serious violence and knife crime within schools.

## Methodology

The research took a two-phase qualitative approach, drawing on multiple audiences within schools to understand the range of perspectives and understanding of knife crime policy and practice. All schools recruited for this research had previously dealt with or were actively dealing with knife crime as a safeguarding issue at the time of the research. Verian conducted in-depth interviews with strategic leads (including head teachers, deputy head teachers and designated safeguarding leads) in schools, followed by focus groups with delivery staff (e.g. classroom teachers, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and pastoral staff).

For Phase 1 of the research, Verian conducted 40 online in-depth interviews with strategic leads in 40 schools in England between October and December 2024. Schools were recruited to cover a spread of regions and school types, as well as different levels of urbanisation of area (urban and suburban/rural). These interviews explored the specific context of the school and their policies in detail.

Insight from the Phase 1 interviews was used to purposively select schools with varying types of incidents, policies and implementation methods to re-contact for Phase 2. During Phase 2, Verian conducted 7 online focus groups to explore the understanding and role of delivery staff in schools' knife crime policies and practices. Each focus group involved up to 4 teachers and other staff from the school.

Please note this research is designed to explore the views and experiences of schools and their staff in-depth. The data reported in this document has been designed to provide in-depth views of the participants in 40 schools, therefore the results cannot be generalised to all schools in England.

## Overview of schools' perception of knife crime

Amongst schools participating in the research, knife crime was not perceived as a discrete issue they needed to tackle. Instead, knife crime was viewed as part of a wider ecosystem of safeguarding concerns, including gang culture and mental health. Therefore, instead of having standalone policies to deal with knife crime, schools tended to embed them into broader safeguarding procedures.

School leaders and staff generally felt that the scale and extent of safeguarding issues within schools were increasing, and that their role in safeguarding had become broader over time. They raised concerns that they did not always feel equipped to address the broadening role.

Whilst schools did have concerns about knife crime incidents within school, staff felt that incidents of knife crime were more likely to occur outside of school. Despite this, concerns about onsite incidents were increasing. Therefore, schools felt that they may need to implement stricter and more specific knife crime policies going forward.

## **Preventing knife crime in schools**

There was a wide variety of knife crime prevention activities across schools, ranging from whole-school approaches to targeted one-to-one support. However, factors such as funding constraints, limited staff and external organisation capacity meant that schools were sometimes unable to offer all the prevention activities they would like to. Therefore, schools had to make decisions about what prevention activities to do based on their perceptions of the level of risk the school was at, as well as the risk of individual pupils.

The level of whole school risk was determined by factors such as the type of school, contextual safeguarding issues, the school and local community's relationships with the police and risk prioritisation (i.e. the perceived risk of knife crime within the school in comparison to other safeguarding issues, such as attendance and mental health)

Pupil level risk was determined by a range of interlinking factors, such as the presence of mental health issues, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), use of drugs or alcohol, and exposure to and involvement in criminal behaviour.

## **Responding to knife crime**

The process for responding to incidents of knife crime on school premises was relatively consistent across schools involved in the research. This process was made up of four stages: incident detection and initial response, information-gathering, involvement of external groups such as parents, the police and social services, and decision-making and sanctioning.

Schools took one of two approaches to making decisions and sanctioning pupils following an onsite knife crime incident: either a zero-tolerance or case-by-case approach. The approach taken by schools was influenced by the context of the school. For example, schools with better local provision for excluded pupils and those perceiving themselves as higher risk sometimes took a zero-tolerance approach. This meant any involvement with knife crime resulted in pupils being permanently removed from the school. In contrast, schools taking a case-by-case approach more commonly reported a high proportion of pupils with high levels of need and vulnerability, a low level of perceived risk around knife crime and having the capacity to offer support for pupils within school.

Approaches to dealing with offsite knife crime incidents differed between schools, with some schools taking more action than others. This was determined by the nature of the incident and the pupils involved. However, schools involved in the

research tended to agree that the immediate response to offsite incidents was the responsibility of the police and parents.

## **Implementing knife crime policy and practice**

Schools' implementation practices were generally not specific to knife crime, instead forming part of essential safeguarding work. Implementation practices targeted a range of different groups, such as school staff, pupils, and parents/carers. However, the core implementation practices tended to be linked to staff training.

Overall, staff interviewed in the research were satisfied with their schools' policies/practices for identifying risk and responding to incidents.

## **Further support for schools**

Schools identified areas they felt that they would benefit from additional support. This included additional guidance from DfE on knife crime-specific policy, such as the use of search and restraint and the school's role in offsite knife crime incidents. Other areas where school leaders and staff thought they could benefit from more support included resources and training for staff to build confidence in preventing and responding to knife crime incidents, guidance on working alongside external organisations, such as the police, and how best to engage with parents and carers about knife crime.



# Introduction

## Policy context

Tackling serious youth violence is an important government priority. In the Serious Violence Duty (2022) and the Safer Streets mission, there is a clear focus on early intervention and prevention, and their importance in tackling the root causes of serious violence. These strategies highlight the need to intervene with children and young people early to keep them safe from harms of violence and allow them to achieve and thrive. Moreover, the Youth Justice Board has identified education as a priority area of focus to achieve an evidence-driven youth justice system, placing children first due to the key role that education plays in both the prevention of offending and re-offending.

The Department for Education (DfE) is an essential part of the cross-government effort to prevent serious violence. Through its core mission of enabling children to thrive, protecting vulnerable children from harmful outcomes and improving children's life chances, DfE plays a vital role in serious violence reduction initiatives, with focus on prevention and early intervention.

The Youth Endowment Fund (YEF), established in 2019, is a charity which aims to reduce and prevent youth violence. YEF funds and evaluates programmes aimed at reducing violence, and it strives to change policy and practice to ensure children are better supported.

YEF and DfE have set up a serious violence research programme (What Works Centre for Serious Violence). The programme aims to understand how a person's journey through different systems of support, and the different qualities of experiences along the way, serve to protect or expose them to involvement in serious youth violence as a victim or pupil.

Work commissioned so far through this research programme has highlighted that schools are one of the most common system entry points for the identification of risk of involvement in knife crime and referral on to support services. Schools and educational settings are therefore:

- An important avenue for helping to understand the prevalence of serious youth violence.
- Are uniquely placed to see the signs of harms.
- In a position where they may need to identify and respond to serious violence incidents.

## Research aims and objectives

As part of the serious violence research programme, DfE commissioned Verian to conduct qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which

schools and school leaders identify and respond to serious violence and knife crime within educational settings. More specifically, the research set out to:

- Better understand if and how schools are developing and implementing policies and practices to help identify, prevent, and reduce, occurrences of violence in and around schools. Gaining insight into what these policies and practices look like.
- Identify and better understand the types of safeguarding activities schools, are adopting to support pupils who are at risk of, or are already involved in, serious violence as a pupil or victim.
- Explore what types of guidance, support, and training are available and/or are required for staff (if any) on identifying and responding to Serious Violence in schools and educational settings.
- Build on the quantitative findings from the DfE's School and College Voice Survey to help shape the development of practice and systems guidance, making sure it is evidence-driven and addresses the existing challenges currently faced by schools.

# Methodology

## Research approach

The research took a two-phase qualitative approach, drawing on multiple audiences within schools to understand the range of perspectives and understanding. This included in-depth interviews with strategic leads in Phase 1 and focus groups with delivery group staff (for example, classroom teachers, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and pastoral staff) in Phase 2. Schools involved in the research had all previously dealt with or were actively dealing with knife crime as a safeguarding issue at the time of the research and so the schools within the sample may have more comprehensive training and policies than the broader school population.

Please note this research is designed to explore the views and experiences of schools and their staff in-depth. The data reported in this document has been designed to provide in-depth views of the participants in 40 schools, therefore the results cannot be generalised to all schools in England.

### Phase 1

Verian conducted 40 in-depth interviews with strategic leads in 40 schools between October and December 2024. This included headteachers, deputy headteachers, and safeguarding leads. In-depth interviews were the most appropriate method for this audience as they allowed the space for participants to discuss the specific context of their school and its policies in detail.

Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Conducting these interviews remotely was beneficial, as it allowed Verian to respond to the fast-changing schedules that these members of staff had. The interviews took up to an hour. Participants received a £50 voucher incentive for taking part.

### Phase 2

Insight data from the in-depth interviews was used to purposively select schools to re-contact for Phase 2. Schools with varying types of incidents, policies and implementation methods were re-contacted. We also ensured that there was a mix of primary, secondary and special schools. Seven schools were involved in Phase 2.

A focus group was conducted within each of these schools. Every selected school was asked to provide contact details to arrange focus group discussions with up to 4 teachers and other staff in the school. The focus groups explored what delivery staff understood about their school policies for identifying and responding to serious violence incidents, what their role was within this context, and how effective they perceived the implementation and training around these policies to be.

Focus groups were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams and took up to one hour long. Each participant received a £30 voucher incentive.

## Sample design

The DfE, YEF and Verian agreed on a set of criteria that informed the sample frame for recruitment for Phase 1. The primary criteria included:

- **Location:** We recruited schools across the regions of England to ensure that findings incorporated insight from across the country.
- **School type (educational stage):** To ensure insight is gathered into the range and variation in approaches across primary schools, secondary schools, special schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs).
- **Urbanisation of area:** Knife crime is likely to look different based on the level of urbanisation. We therefore recruited a mix of schools from urban and suburban/rural areas.

To ensure a spread across types of school, we also included secondary criteria including proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and proportion of pupils from a minority ethnic background.

For Phase 2, schools were selected based on insight from the in-depth interviews. Specific quotas were not set, but schools were selected based on having varied characteristics and a range of approaches to identify and respond to serious violence incidents. At Phase 1, strategic leads were able to opt out of being re-contacted for further research.

## Recruitment

Participants for Phase 1 were recruited via DfE's School and College Voice panel re-contact sample. The School and College Voice survey asked respondents if they were willing to be recontacted for further research. Schools were eligible for recruitment if they had agreed to be recontacted and had reported having previously dealt with or were actively dealing with knife crime as a safeguarding issue.

The following steps were taken during Phase 1 to recruit from the sample:

- An initial email was sent to the opted-in sample to provide more information about the project. The email asked for the recipient to respond with availability for a short screening call and requested telephone contact details.
- Where the recruiter received availability and/or a telephone number, they called the participant and was taken through a bespoke recruitment screener in full. As well as screening for quotas, this allowed the recruiter to answer any initial questions about the research. At the end of the call, the participant was booked in for an interview.
- Where we did not receive a response, a follow up email was sent.

- Where we exhausted all responses to emails, our specialist recruiters moved to cold calling the numbers we had available.

Once schools had been selected for Phase 2, the strategic lead was asked to provide contact details of up to 4 teachers and other school staff to arrange a focus group discussion. One focus group was held per selected school.

## **Development of research materials**

In collaboration with DfE and YEF, Verian designed a flexible discussion guide for the Phase 1 in-depth interviews. This discussion guide was then adapted for the Phase 2 focus groups based on feedback from Phase 1 and priority areas indicated by DfE and YEF. It was also adapted to suit the non-leadership audience.

Other research materials designed by Verian for the qualitative research included an invitation letter for participants, an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, and a privacy notice.

# Overview of schools' perception of knife crime

## Key findings

- Knife crime was not perceived to be by participants as a discrete issue for schools to tackle. Instead, it was perceived to be part of a wider ecosystem of safeguarding concerns such as gang culture, anti-social behaviour, and mental health.
- Schools interviewed rarely had standalone knife crime policies, instead embedding them into broader safeguarding procedures.
- Generally, staff felt that the scale and extent of safeguarding issues within their schools were increasing, and therefore, their responsibilities in safeguarding were expanding too.
- Schools tended to be more concerned about the likelihood of knife crime incidents happening outside of school than on school premises.

Before understanding how the schools interviewed responded to knife crime, it is essential to understand how they perceived it as an issue. This section explores how schools within the sample saw knife crime in relation to other issues they are faced with, how these perceptions influence policy and practice, and how ways of working may evolve going forward.

## Knife crime in the safeguarding ecosystem

Knife crime was not perceived as a discrete, stand-alone issue for schools to tackle. Instead, it was consistently perceived to be part of a wider ecosystem of safeguarding concerns. Key elements of this safeguarding ecosystem included gang culture, anti-social behaviour, online harms, mental health, deprivation and neglect. Please see Figure 1 for a more comprehensive ecosystem of interlinked safeguarding concerns discussed in the interviews. Each element of this ecosystem was inter-related and therefore school staff thought that any knife crime incidents should be viewed in the context of these other issues.

**Figure 1: Ecosystem of interlinked safeguarding concerns**



The approach to knife crime policies and practices tended to reflect this perception. Knife crime was embedded within broader safeguarding policies rather than being separate. While in some cases policies referred specifically to knife crime, they were more likely to focus on risk of broader safeguarding issues, or the risk of being involved in broader violence and/or harm to others.

"I think the danger with creating more and more policies for very specific things is that it gets lost" *Strategic Lead, Primary School, South-East*

"In terms of our policy, it just comes under our behaviour policy. We don't have a specific knife crime policy" *Strategic Lead, Special School, West Midlands*

When reflecting on the safeguarding ecosystem, school staff identified other areas that tended to take precedence over concerns about knife crime. This varied by school's context but commonly included issues such as parental/guardian neglect, mental health and drugs. Each of these were perceived to have a potential to increase the risk of knife crime among their pupils.

"The drug [problem] obviously continues...But the biggest thing now is the vapes. It is part of the criminal exploitation area, which is, you know, get them into the vapes...And then it moves on obviously to buy and sell and potentially bigger things." *Strategic lead, Secondary School, South-East*

School staff differentiated between the perceived risk of an incident on or off school premises, spontaneously highlighting that they were more concerned about incidents happening off school premises. This was largely driven by their awareness of more serious incidents involving pupils or former pupils happening within the community

rather than on school grounds. School staff provided several reasons why this might have occurred, including:

- The perception that pupils felt less 'watched' by adults outside of school grounds, therefore leading pupils to think they were at a lower risk of getting caught.
- Pupils having wider issues, such as gang culture, in their community leading them to feel unsafe and carry a knife for protection.
- Pupils being encouraged by friends or siblings to carry a knife for protection outside of school.

"You can tell people over and over again that it's a really stupid idea to carry a knife around, but [we] can't make the place in which they live a safe place." *Strategic Lead, Special School, Yorkshire*

While concerns about knife crime incidents in school were lower, they were growing. Schools reported an increase in bladed items being found on site and were concerned about reports they were hearing at a national level.

## Perceptions of the evolving role of schools in safeguarding

The delivery group staff interviewed (including teaching and pastoral staff) generally reported feeling confident in identifying and escalating safeguarding concerns in the current landscape. However, they recognised that the safeguarding environment was evolving which was causing their role in safeguarding to expand.

School staff highlighted that they were doing an increasing amount of work that would have traditionally sat in the social work and police space. This included working with parents and handling issues outside of school. They attributed this to other agencies not having the capacity to pick it up. They were concerned that this trend was not showing any sign of stopping and predicated that schools would continue to gain more safeguarding responsibilities. Some were concerned that schools were being left to deal with the issues, such as declining pupil mental health and increased criminal exploitation of pupils, which have a wider cause that neither schools nor the DfE can fix.

Alongside this, schools were aware of the national trends of knife crime. They anticipated the issue was likely to increase, and that they may need more specific and stricter policies around knife crime as the landscape continues to evolve.

The additional safeguarding burden and increase in knife crime more generally has led to schools needing to prioritise their focus, as it is not possible to tackle all issues for all pupils. Schools are therefore making decisions about what is possible for them to do within budgets and within their skill set or capacity. This will be explored throughout the rest of the report.



# Preventing Knife Crime in Schools

## Key findings

- There was a wide variety of knife crime prevention activities across the 40 schools interviewed. However, schools were not able to do every activity they would like due to funding constraints, limited staff and external organisation capacity, and the need to prioritise other safeguarding issues.
- Strategic leads had to make decisions about what prevention activities to do based on their perceptions of school and pupil level risks.
- School level risk was determined by factors such as the school type (primary, secondary or special school), contextual safeguarding issues, communities' perceptions of and relationship with the police, and risk prioritisation.
- Pupil level risk was determined by factors such as mental health issues, SEND and SEMH needs, use of drugs and/or alcohol, and exposure to and involvement in crime.

## Types of prevention activities

Schools engaged in a wide range of prevention activities. While some were specific to knife crime, others were aimed at tackling safeguarding issues more broadly. For example, some activities were used both where a pupil was at risk of becoming involved in knife crime, and where they were at risk of other harms, for example, criminal exploitation.

The activities had differing target audiences and can be categorised as **pupil facing interventions** or **staff facing activities**. Each of these activity types are discussed in the sections below.

### Pupil facing interventions

There was a wide variety of pupil-based prevention interventions across schools which are outlined below in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Pupil-facing interventions delivered within schools**

Whole school	Group targeted support	One-to-one
PSHE	Group session therapies	Mentoring
	Activity based mentoring (e.g., with a local football team)	Counselling
	Police or external agency workshops	Therapy (talking therapies & alternative therapies e.g. art)
	External speakers with lived experience	Setting up safety plans with parents
	Running parent sessions	CAMHS
	Local Authority & other externally run youth clubs or groups	Social services

Key: Internal provision External provision Both

These activities varied in the extent to which they were targeted at the whole school, specific groups of pupils, or individual pupils.

- **Whole school interventions** tended to be more generalised and educational such a PSHE sessions.
- **Group targeted activities** (for example, police workshops) were perceived by the school staff interviewed as effective with specific year groups or groups of pupils within the school who were at risk of becoming involved in knife crime. These tended to explicitly tackle the issue of knife crime and related issues such as criminal exploitation and gang membership.
- **One-to-one support** (for example, therapy services) was seen as effective where an individual was at high risk of knife related harm. These activities tended to address the underlying issues which may be influencing the pupil's involvement in knife crime and other harms.

The activities were delivered by a range of different stakeholders. **In some cases, activities were delivered by internal staff.** This tended to occur when:

- Activities did not require specialist skills, knowledge or experience, including information sharing.
- Schools had capacity and funding for a comprehensive pastoral team, including counsellors. In these cases, schools were able to internally provide therapy-based activities such as mentoring and counselling.

Delivering activities using internal staff was perceived by senior leaders as resource intensive. For some activities, they required highly skilled staff, so the activities came at a high cost to the school. Other activities took up a high proportion of staff time meaning activities were also capacity resource intensive.

There were also pupil-facing interventions that were delivered by external stakeholders. These were generally used when:

- Schools were not able to allocate funding for in-house therapy and counselling, so pupils were referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
- Schools could not meet the needs of the pupil, either because of lack of skill or lack of capacity.
- Schools who felt they did not have adequate subject knowledge needed to provide specific activities for pupils considered at risk, so they opted for lived-experienced speakers in assemblies and police workshops.

Delivering activities externally was perceived by senior leaders as less of a strain on staff capacity but it was understood that some of these activities could come at an additional cost.

## Staff-facing activities

Staff-facing activities were integrated into daily tasks and responsibilities. These activities tended to be seen as less resource intensive than pupil interventions because they were not as dependent on staff capacity and skill. Instead, they relied on teachers and other staff being aware of their roles and responsibilities, and partnerships with external organisations (other schools, social services and the police). Broadly, the aims of staff facing activities were to identify pupils who were at risk of harm and reduce the risk of harm within school.

There were four key activity types, each of which is outlined below. Table 1 provides examples of each of these activity types.

## Information gathering

Information gathering activities were seen as crucial in school safeguarding and were very common in the schools we engaged with. Schools tended to gather information in three ways. Firstly, sharing information *within* the school. Teachers were required to log small changes in pupils' behaviour, social groups, and attendance to build a better picture of pupils they were concerned about. Teachers were also asked to log more significant incidents like fighting or bullying. Building a better picture of the pupil allowed strategic leads to identify risks early and, where they felt it was necessary, take preventative action. Secondly, there was some evidence of information sharing *between* schools. This was used either to identify pupils who were at risk of knife harm, or to track emerging safeguarding trends in the local area. Thirdly, schools engaged in information sharing with *external organisations*. This included information sharing between schools and the police as part of Operation Encompass<sup>2</sup>, as well as between schools and social services. This was to understand what pupils were experiencing and being exposed to outside of

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<sup>2</sup> Operation Encompass is a partnership between the police and schools which ensures that the school's Deputy Safeguarding Lead is made aware of incidents of domestic abuse that involve the pupil (as a witness or victim) before the next school day. The aim is to enable schools to provide immediate and appropriate support for the child involved.

school. This information helped leaders decide which additional support pupils may need.

### **Infrastructure to prevent pupils from bringing knives into school**

This involved having additional structures or processes to detect knives brought onto school premises. These were less commonly employed than information gathering activities and were more common in secondary schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). Electronic wands were used by some participating schools to detect knives alongside other prohibited items such as vapes or phones during exams. Knife arches were less commonly used and tended to be used sporadically with the police present.

### **Procedures to prevent the harmful use of bladed items in school**

These are the systems which controlled access to bladed items, for example, knives and scissors being locked away. When knives or scissors needed to be used, they had to be signed in or out with a designated staff member. In specific settings, for example in design technology classes, the use of bladed items may be restricted so that pupils who have a risk assessment in place, for example due to known gang involvement outside of school, do not have access.

### **Procedures to reduce the risk of outside threats to safety**

This refers to physical barriers to safeguard pupils. For example, locking the school gates during school hours or having designated drop-off and pick-up zones outside of the school gate (more common for primary schools). In conjunction with having lockdown procedures, schools could also have doors which locked from the inside, which can only be opened from the outside with a pass or key. One primary school also requested for their local police officer to be present at events hosted outside of the school grounds, which were not secured by gates.

**Table 1: Staff-Facing Activities**

Information gathering	Infrastructure to prevent knives on site	Procedures to prevent use of bladed items already on site	Procedures to reduce external threats to safety
CPOMS, MyConcern, keeping physical incident logs	Bag searches	Keeping knives and scissors locked away	Locking school gates during school hours
Information sharing with the police through Operation Encompass	Use of electronic wands	Signing in/out scissors and knives	Designated drop-off and pick-up zones outside of the school gates

Information gathering	Infrastructure to prevent knives on site	Procedures to prevent use of bladed items already on site	Procedures to reduce external threats to safety
Information sharing with social services and other external organisations	Use of knife arches, generally with police present	Restricted access to bladed items in design technology classes	Doors which cannot be opened from the outside without a pass or key
Information sharing with local schools			Having police present at events hosted outside of the school grounds

## Decision-making around which prevention activities to implement

The schools we interviewed were not able to use all the preventative activities highlighted in the previous section, as they were constrained by funding, staff capacity and other factors. Instead, strategic leads made decisions on which activities to implement based on proportionality and appropriateness.

### Rationale for decision-making

While there were many activities that were being used across schools to prevent knife crime incidents, individual schools were restricted in how many of these they could feasibly use. They were constrained by the following factors.

- **Funding:** Schools commonly cited being under severe budgetary pressure, with multiple competing priorities. They could not afford to do all the activities that they would like to do.
- **Staff capacity:** School staff in a range of different roles discussed the lack of time they had to deliver all the activities that they would like to, to all the pupils they felt needed support. This was particularly felt by pastoral staff who were delivering a high proportion of the pupil-facing activities.
- **Competing safeguarding priorities:** Schools had to think about whether activities targeted to knife crime prevention were more or less important than activities targeting other area like vapes, attendance and mental health.
- **Partnerships with external organisations:** Such as the police, social services and the local authority. Schools were reliant on partnership working to be informed about available resources and services for pupil-facing activities. Schools were constrained by what their partners could offer.

Schools had to make decisions about which activities to prioritise. These decisions were driven by what senior leaders felt was proportionate and appropriate for their school, and individual pupils within it. Prevention activities were also chosen to be age appropriate as schools wanted to prevent scaring pupils or over-exaggerating the risk that they face.

## Proportionality

**School level risk** There were several factors that determined how strategic leads perceived their school risk level, and what activities they would be more inclined to employ.

**School type** helped to inform which prevention activities were chosen as it was linked to the school risk level. Generally, mainstream primary and secondary schools were seen as lower risk than PRUs and some special schools. PRUs generally perceived themselves as high-risk where pupils had previously been excluded due to behavioural issues, including knife-related issues. In those high-risk environments, some PRUs chose to search their pupils daily with an electronic wand. There was variation in how special schools perceived their level of risk, this variation was based on the needs of the pupil and their ability to control their own behaviour. For example, a school for pupils who are deaf didn't perceive itself at risk of knife crime, but another special school where pupils had greater social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs did see itself as being more at risk of knife related harm. Therefore, the special school with greater SEMH needs chose more targeted activities such as knife crime specific PSHE or speech and language therapy to help pupils communicate more effectively.

**Contextual safeguarding issues** were perceived by strategic leads as good indicators of school-level risk. For example, where a school's local area and community had high incidents of anti-social behaviour, gang activity and drug use, schools tended to perceive themselves at a higher risk of knife-related incidents. When schools felt knife crime was a contextual safeguarding issue, they opted to specifically engage with knife crime through knife-crime specific PSHE, lived experience speakers and assemblies. These activities were more common in secondary schools but appeared in some higher risk primary schools.

Similarly, where **local communities had poor or negative relationships with the police**, school risk-level was perceived to increase. Engaging with the police within school through workshops and talks was used to help pupils change their perceptions of, and build stronger relationships with, the police. This was used throughout primary and secondary schools, and activities varied to be age appropriate. For example, one primary school had sessions where pupils could meet local police animals. In another primary school, pupils in Year 6 were shown all the weapons found within a 100-metre radius of their school by the police. For those in secondary schools, police workshops tended to focus on consequences of knife-related crime.

“The local area has issues with knife crime and gangs but as we’re a primary school, we only do work with our older kids.” *Strategic Lead, Primary School, London.*

**Risk prioritisation** was important in informing which prevention activities schools chose to engage with. Safeguarding teams had to assess which safeguarding issues the school faced, and which ones needed to be focused on. This was a subjective process, and teachers and leader felt that they were the experts of their own schools and pupils. Therefore, they felt they didn’t need a toolkit or framework to prioritise risks. Where schools saw knife crime at the forefront of their safeguarding issues, they explicitly addressed it through targeted prevention work. Where schools felt they needed to prioritise other issues such as vapes, attendance, mental health or drug and alcohol use, they tended to choose less targeted prevention work.

**Broader pupil population needs** informed school risk-level, and schools with higher proportions of children in adverse living situations (for example, in care or looked after children), or with SEND or SEMH needs, perceived themselves as higher risk. This was associated with higher risk because children who may have experienced childhood trauma were seen as less able to regulate their emotions and may be more likely to engage in knife related harm. These schools tended to do more targeted work with their pupils by engaging specifically with knife crime in PSHE for example. Where many pupils had English as a second language, the strategic leads interviewed perceived that this as an increased school level risk because they felt it was harder to engage with parents who may have differently perceived cultural norms. This related to both language barriers and parents having varying perceptions of the role of the school versus the role of parents in safeguarding their children. Some schools chose to engage with parents through information sessions as a form of prevention, whilst others chose to engage pupils through police workshops to change perceptions of policing and how knife crime can impact pupils’ lives.

“We are around 25% EHCP, 50% SEN, our pupil premium is higher than national... We take a lot of students who have been excluded, so we have a high level of need.” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South West*

### Case study 1: Primary SEND school in the North-West

A primary school in the North-West considered itself high risk of knife crime incidents. Both strategic leads in the school and other staff were aware of many pupils' families being involved in crime. Many of the pupils also had significant SEMH needs. This was seen to increase the school-level risk because pupils were perceived as less able to control their emotions and communicate gently.

Strategic staff selected prevention activities to match the school-level risk. Although this was a primary school, pupils covered knife crime specifically within their PSHE curriculum. Other activities included yearly workshops from someone with lived experience of knife crime (their brother was killed in a knife crime incident), police workshops and one-to-one sessions, and full-time pastoral staff who can help nurture pupils. These knife-crime specific activities were deemed age-appropriate for these pupils, as they were exposed to criminality outside of school

"We do preventative stuff within the classroom. Part of our PSHE curriculum will look at things like what the police do... and why you shouldn't be using knives."

Strategic Lead, Special School, North-West

### Case study 2: Pupil Referral Unit in the South-East

The school perceived itself as high risk because it was a PRU and the nature of its pupils. This PRU took in pupils with a history of knife-related incidents and all pupils had EHCPs and SEMH needs. Knife crime was also an issue in the local community.

Prevention activity included searching all pupils with an electronic wand every morning. Knife crime was also specifically covered through PSHE and the curriculum more broadly. This was seen as appropriate given the level of risk the school faces.

"We've got quite a lot of young people who I think... are part of communities whereby they see it [carrying a knife] as the only means to keep themselves safe."

Strategic Lead, PRU, South-East

Decisions about which pupil facing prevention activities to use were also driven by the perceived risk of specific pupils within the school. There were a range of factors that schools used to determine which pupils were at risk. Some of these factors were individual to the pupil, for example mental health and SEND. Others were social, for example when they were mimicking behaviours seen in their wider lives. There was a level of crossover between individual and social factors.

**Pupils with poor mental health** were deemed to be higher risk because they were perceived by school staff as being more likely to bring in a bladed item to school.



However, school staff and nurses were able to see evidence that the purpose of the blade was often for self-harm rather than to inflict harm on others. The prevention activities offered tended to be counselling and therapy. When schools were unable to provide this internally, then the pupil could be referred to CAMHS or other external mental health services.

**Pupils with SEND or SEMH needs** were seen as higher risk because schools felt these pupils were less able to regulate their own behaviour and reactions to triggers. Often, strategic leads outlined that these pupils also lacked the ability to communicate effectively. For these pupils, prevention activities varied from speech and language therapy to alternative talking therapies like LEGO or art therapy. Where a school felt they were not able to provide adequate support for the pupil, they could also be referred to an Alternative Provision (AP) setting or special school.

“Many [pupils] are not very good at judging safety either of others or self-preservation and so they do things that are silly, and they overreact... they enact what they see on the TV a lot... they see violence... and it’s reflected in their temper” *Strategic Lead, Special School, Yorks*

**Alcohol and drug use** was also associated with pupils being more likely to engage in knife crime because pupils were already engaging in risky behaviour. Pupils were also seen as less able to judge what was risky and what was good or bad. These pupils were also more likely to have mental health issues and engage in self-harm. Prevention activities varied from counselling, therapy and mentoring to referrals to outside agencies such as the police or social services where the school felt the pupil was at serious risk of harm outside of school.

“That group of students... were taking substances and they were engaging in self-harm...and then they were bringing these blades on to site as well.” *Strategic Lead, Secondary school, South-East*

Some pupils were thought to be more likely to engage in knife crime where they **perceived knives as a status symbol**. These pupils were carrying knives or bringing them to school to show off to friends and saw this as being ‘cool’ and increased their ‘street cred’. Schools tended to offer prevention activities which aimed to build confidence and educate on the risks of carrying knives. Activities included police workshops and mentoring.

Pupils who were more at **risk of criminal exploitation** were also seen as more likely to engage in knife crime. These pupils saw **knives as a form of protection**. Other pupils who may see knives as protection were those being bullied in and outside of school. Schools tended to offer prevention activities which aimed to build confidence, healthy relationship and to educate on the risks of knife crime, for example external mentoring with an army commando or football-based mentoring. Some pupils may also be offered counselling or therapy. Where the school thought there was a serious risk of harm, they may also contact the police or social services.

“I think it is criminal exploitation of children. I think that's what's forcing them to carry knives.” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South-East*

School staff interviewed thought that pupils were drawn to carrying knives because of **herd mentality and peer-pressuring**. Where many of their friends may be carrying knives, school staff felt that pupils may not see it as risky and be more likely to carry a knife too. Similarly, to those at risk of exploitation, these pupils may be offered activities to build confidence and education on the risks of carrying a knife.

**Mimicking behaviours seen in the local community or within their home** was seen as an important factor in informing pupil-level risk. Some pupils may be encouraged by family or their community to carry a knife, or they may be mimicking the behaviour seen on social media, TV and music. Schools tended to choose prevention activities which allowed pupils to open up and report/identify if they were at risk of criminal exploitation such as talking and alternative therapies. Schools may also choose mentoring with mentors who have lived experience of knife crime, which pupils may find easier to identify with.

“That sort of language and behaviour seems to be something they they're mirroring from older kids, could be family members, could be the wider community.” *Strategic Lead, Primary School, South-East*

Case study 3: Pupil at risk of bringing in a knife to protect themselves from bullying

A pupil was being bullied within a secondary school in the East Midlands. Schools staff had noticed some indicators of risk including changes in the pupil's behaviour, becoming withdrawn and changes to their social circle. They had been involved in fighting in the past. They were therefore considered high risk of involvement in a knife-related incident as they may turn to carrying a knife to protect themselves.

The school had a menu of appropriate activities to choose from. These included:

- Referral to targeted youth work to ensure the pupil does not become disaffected and works on raising aspirations.
- Therapy, including alternative therapies, to offer the pupil a safe space to talk.
- External mentoring from an army commando to boost confidence and provide coping strategies.

The school engaged with the pupil to work out the best course of action, rather than using all of the above.

“Quite often it's just young people who have sort of quite poor perceptions. You know, they're being bullied, so they think they're going to protect themselves [by carrying a knife].” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, East Midlands*

#### Case study 4: Pupil becomes involved in knife crime outside of school through criminal exploitation

A pupil in a secondary school in the South-East was from a family with a history of, and ongoing involvement in, criminality. The pupil was engaging in anti-social behaviour and substance use outside of school. The school also suspects that the pupil may have some gang affiliation. They are therefore considered high risk of knife crime involvement.

The school had various options for preventative activities including:

- Football based mentoring from Kick London. This allows the pupil to do group work, and the session leader has lived experience of knife crime so can provide 1:1 mentoring.
- The school can also refer the pupil to counselling or therapy provided by the local PRU, as this gives the pupil a chance to talk freely about their concerns and feelings.
- Alternatively, the school can provide art therapy to give the pupil space to speak to an adult in a less intense environment.

“He’s [the mentor] a footballer, and he comes in and works with some of our more vulnerable students... He mentors them around how to avoid being in a situation that is going to put you in danger.” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South-East*

## Appropriateness

The prevention activities that schools deemed as appropriate was dependent on the age and the cognitive ability of pupils to engage with the content of the activity.

Schools ensured that **activities were age-appropriate**, therefore, primary schools tended to choose less targeted activities such as having non-knife crime specific PSHE sessions. Whereas secondary school aged pupils were able to engage with more knife crime specific content such as lived experience assemblies and police workshops.

Schools also adapted prevention activities to the **cognitive ability of their pupils**. For example, a special school did not think many of its pupils would be able to engage with the concept of knife crime. Instead, they chose to engage in activities targeted at building healthy relationships and communication.

“It [knife crime] will be touched upon, but only because it's part of the curriculum, really, and it will only be touched upon with the older children and with the more able children, those that have the cognitive awareness to understand what we're talking about.”

*Strategic lead, Special School, Yorks*

## Responding to knife crime

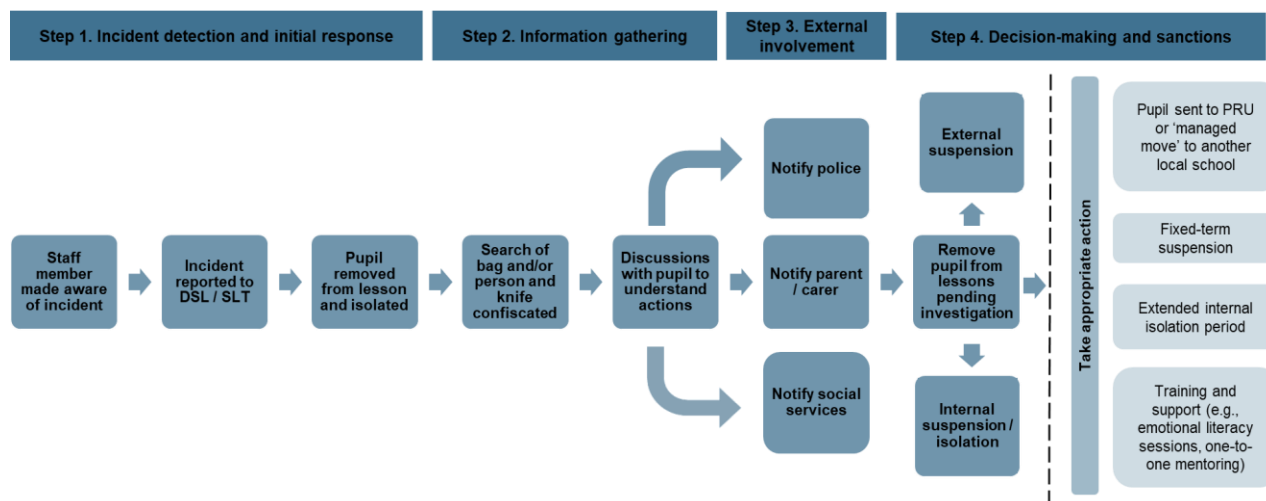
### Key findings

- The process for responding to incidents of knife crime on school premises was relatively consistent across the schools interviewed.
- Responses involved a four-stage process involving incident detection and initial response, information-gathering, external involvement and decision-making and sanctions.
- Decision-making processes differed based on whether schools took a zero-tolerance or case-by-case approach to dealing with knife crime.
- The approach taken by schools was influenced by the context of the school, such as perceived risk level and levels of need.
- Schools differed in their approaches to dealing with offsite incidents but tended to agree that the immediate response was the responsibility of police and parents.

Alongside the exploration of prevention strategies, we also explored the steps schools go through when an incident of knife crime happens on school premises.

Participating schools tended to follow a four-stage process including: incident detection and initial response, information-gathering, external involvement, and decision-making and sanctions. This section will explore each of these steps in turn. There was a high level of consistency in the approaches schools were taking to incident detection and initial response, and information gathering. However, approaches to external involvement and decision-making and sanctions varied between schools.

**Figure 3: Stages of response to knife crime incidents in school**



## Incident detection and initial response

Incident detection and initial response followed a relatively consistent pattern across school types.

School staff became aware of incidents via three key routes: through overhearing conversations between pupils about the presence of a knife on site, having a student report a knife on site/incident to them, or by witnessing a knife on site/incident directly. Once they were aware of an incident, staff were required to report incidents in line with the broader school safeguarding policy, rather than following a knife crime specific policy. Across schools, there was a consistent focus on making senior leadership staff aware and on the urgency of action. Methods used to report the incidents included: face-to-face discussions, telephone/radio, or using online systems such as CPOMS, MyConcern or TeamSOS.

Once the senior leadership staff received a report, they would remove the pupil from class to ensure the safety of other pupils. The role of delivery staff in response to an incident tended to end at this point, with the remaining stages of response being carried out by senior leadership staff.

## Information gathering

Similarly to incident detection, schools were consistent in their approach to information gathering.

After being removed from class, the pupil in question would be asked to give the knife to the senior leadership staff member. If they refused, the senior staff member would conduct a search of the pupil and their school bag to remove the knife. In

some cases, parent/carers consent was required for this to take place. At least two members of staff would always be present when conducting a search. One school also reported having a script they would follow when conducting non-contact searches, to ensure consistency.

"We make sure that all bag searches are carried out with a member of SLT and also another member of staff, usually a pastoral worker or another member of SLT, so no one is ever alone, so there's no accusation of anything untoward happening, regardless of what we're searching for" *Strategic Lead, Secondary school, South-East*

Once the pupil had handed over the knife, senior leadership staff tended to have a discussion with the pupil, and others who may have been involved, to understand details of the incident and the pupil's intentions. This may include witnesses to the incident, or friends and parents/carers to understand why the incident may have taken place. Information gathered during these discussions would later be used to help determine the outcome for the pupil.

## External involvement

At this stage in the process, schools began to bring in expertise and support beyond internal staff, including police and social services. Their approaches to this varied based on the nature of the incident and the pupil involved.

### Police involvement in response to an on-site incident

There were several ways in which school staff may involve the police following a knife being on, and/or being used on school premises, including:

- Making a record of the incident
- Removing the knife from the school premises
- Arresting the pupil
- Providing guidance and support about the appropriate next steps for the pupil

The type and level of police involvement varied by school. The extent to which they were involved was driven by the schools' relationship with and perceptions of the police as well as the extent to which they considered the threat nullified.

**Each school's relationship and perceptions of the police were central to how they involved them** at this stage. Schools that followed a zero-tolerance policy (see page 31), thought that police should be involved with every incident to ensure other pupils and staff were protected. Similarly, some schools followed local policing knife crime policy that stated that police should be contacted for any incident. However, in contrast, there were schools that felt that police were supposed to provide support to pupils through youth work and education, but that this support was not provided.

Therefore, they were reluctant to call the police following incidents in school due to fear of criminalising pupils.

“I'm reluctant to get someone arrested if they're not going to get any follow up because our job isn't to criminalize these kids, it's to educate them.” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, West Midlands*

There were instances in which schools and police disagreed about when the police should be involved. While some strategic leads reported that local police policies stated that the police should be involved in every knife crime incident regardless of the severity, others felt that there were instances of the police suggesting that less severe cases (such as a direct threat not being made, or a knife not being used) should be dealt with internally. Some strategic leads agreed that less severe cases should be dealt with by the school in order to avoid criminalising pupils, but other schools felt the lack of police involvement in these cases left school staff feeling at risk. However, strategic leads acknowledged that this lack of support was likely due to police services being extremely stretched and having to prioritise resources.

“And so, we didn't ever get a police officer here helping us. And I think that's part of the challenge is that you can feel very vulnerable. And the service that you think should help you then didn't turn up.”  
*Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South-East*

The nature of the incident and extent to which staff felt the threat had been nullified also influenced whether the police became involved. If staff were unable to remove the knife from the pupil's possession, or if the pupil was acting aggressively or in a threatening way, senior staff were likely to judge there to still be an active threat to pupils and staff. In these cases, the police would be called.

## **Social service involvement in response to an on-site incident**

Social services were not always involved in the response to knife crime incidents in school, but their role was determined by the pupil's background. Schools felt that it was necessary to inform social services of incidents if the pupil or their family was already involved with social services, or if the school felt that the incident could be related to wider safeguarding concerns about a pupil's environment outside of school. For example, if a pupil's parents or other family members were known to be involved in criminality, the school and social services may work together to put a risk assessment and interventions in place for both the individual pupil and their family. In contrast, where parents engaged with the school following an incident or the school did not feel that there were any wider safeguarding issues, social services were unlikely to be involved.

## Decision-making and sanctions

Decision-making processes to decide the best course of action following a knife crime incident in school differed based on whether schools followed a zero-tolerance or case-by-case policy.

A range of factors influenced whether schools took a zero-tolerance or case-by-case approach to sanctioning pupils following an onsite knife crime incident. These policies tended not to be specific to knife crime incidents but instead fell under general safeguarding policies which also covered other forms of serious violence and possession of banned items.

### Zero-tolerance approach

Within the sample, the less common approach was for schools to have a zero-tolerance policy for dealing with knife crime incidents. In these schools, pupils involved in knife-related incidents were permanently removed from the school, regardless of intent or background. Limited decision-making was required, as the outcome for the pupil was pre-determined by the school's policy.

#### Drivers of a zero-tolerance approach

**Schools with a high level of perceived risk** were motivated to have a zero-tolerance approach. Local context was core to these perceptions – areas with concerns about gang-related activity considered themselves at a greater risk. Wider awareness of an increase in knife crime nationally also contributed to the level of risk perceived by these schools. These schools thought that having a zero-tolerance policy was therefore proportional to the level of risk they faced.

“... given the context of what we hear that's happening nationwide at the minute with the increase in knife crime, the increase of students carrying knives around, then you know you don't want to take the risk” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, North-East*

**Schools with a more comprehensive programme of preventative support** were also motivated to have a zero-tolerance approach. The extensive prevention work was considered a significant investment in their pupil's safety, and they suggested that they could not do anything more to support pupils beyond the prevention package they were already providing. These schools also thought that having a transparent and clearly communicated zero-tolerance policy acted as a form of prevention, as it ensured pupils were aware of the consequences and severity of bringing a knife into school.

**Schools with a strong alternative education provision in their local area** felt more able to implement a zero-tolerance approach. Schools who had access to pupil referral units (PRUs) or AP settings in their local area were able to remove pupils from their school following a knife crime incident, whilst ensuring pupils remained in some form of education. As well as using PRUs and AP, these schools also built



strong, reciprocal relationships with other local schools. This enabled them to conduct managed moves of pupils to another school, as an alternative to permanent exclusion.

#### Case study 5 (Zero-tolerance): Secondary school in the East Midlands

The school is based in an area of deprivation, with high levels of knife crime and gang-related activity.

The school experiences around 1-2 incidents a year of pupils bringing knives into school, mainly for protection and to 'feel safe'.

A zero-tolerance policy for knife crime was chosen due to:

1. **High perceived level of risk:** The school is in a high-risk area, so they feel it is necessary to have strict policies in place. A zero-tolerance policy feels proportional to the level of risk.
2. **Lots of preventative work:** The school offers tailored support for at risk pupils and has a good relationship with the local police, who provide education through regular visits.
3. **Good local provision:** Other local schools also have zero-tolerance policies. This enables schools to work together to offer managed moves for excluded pupils.

"If they bring a knife into our school, they don't come back to our school."  
Strategic Lead, Secondary School, East Midlands

## Case-by-case approach

In contrast to the zero-tolerance approach, other schools took a case-by-case approach to making decisions about the future of a pupil after an incident. There were a range of outcomes for pupils within these schools including:

- **Restorative justice:** Where possible, these schools aimed to focus on restorative justice and education. This was particularly the case amongst primary schools and special schools.
- **Internal or external suspension:** Short-term removal of the pupil from interaction with other pupils. Whether the suspension was internal or external was determined by factors such as the set-up of the school and the pupil's living situation. For example, schools with an internal isolation unit may choose to suspend a pupil from their usual lessons but keep them in school, particularly if a pupil comes from a difficult home environment.
- **Permanent exclusion:** Case-by-case schools may still permanently exclude pupils if necessary for pupil and staff safety, depending on the intent and the severity of the incident.

Decisions about how best to sanction a pupil in case-by-case schools tended to involve multiple members of senior leadership, including the Designated

Safeguarding Lead (DSL), headteacher and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs). Responsibility for the final decision usually sits with the headteacher.

Decision-makers considered a range of individual and contextual factors when making decisions about the best course of action for a pupil. As well as the pupil's intent, they also considered any previous patterns of behaviour and the age of the pupil. Schools tended to hold different standards for older and younger pupils, and primary schools acknowledged that their pupils were often under the age of criminal responsibility.

“...you want to demonstrate a kind of practical wisdom. We do expect more of a 16-year-old than we do an 11-year-old” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, North-East*

Case-by-case schools may also consider a pupil's environment and family circumstances when deciding on sanctions and support. Where pupils had difficult home situations or negative influences outside of school, schools tried to avoid removing the pupil from school. They felt that fixed-term suspensions or permanent exclusions risked removing the safety net of school.

### **Drivers of a case-by-case approach**

**Schools with a high proportion of pupils with high need and vulnerability**, such as high levels of deprivation and/or SEND needs were motivated to implement a case-by-case approach. Senior leadership staff considered the context of the individual pupil and the factors that may have driven them to engaging in knife crime when making decisions about the most appropriate course of action. For example, considering whether they had been influenced by a family member to carry a knife, whether the pupil understood the implications of having a knife, or whether a knife or blade had been brought into school for self-harm rather than to harm others. Instead of permanent exclusion, these schools aimed to support pupils within the current system. They may make referrals to social services, GP services and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

“...we made the decision at school that there's always a context for students, so there is nothing that would get you permanently excluded, just as a one-off action.” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South-East*

**Schools with a low level of perceived risk** around knife crime were more likely to take a case-by-case approach. When schools had experienced very few incidents, they were likely to perceive the risk of knife crime to be relatively low, with concerns about other issues such as truancy and use of vapes and drugs being more of a priority. Because of the low number of incidents, these schools were able to consider each incident on a case-by-case basis and were more flexible in how they responded.

"The policies that are in place at the moment are adequate for the job they have to do." *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South East*

**Schools who had capacity to offer support for pupils** who had been involved in a knife crime incident were able to prioritise restorative justice over permanent exclusion. This support could be delivered by both internal school staff and external providers, and included emotional literacy sessions, one-to-one mentoring and meetings with a behavioural support officer.

#### Case study 6 (Case-by-case): Secondary school in the West Midlands

The school has a varied demographic and high levels of deprivation. They have seen an increase in safeguarding concerns over recent years, largely linked to pupils' home environments.

There have been incidents of pupils bringing knives into school, but none where the knife has been used on another pupil. Incidents are mainly linked to mental health challenges and SEND needs, with knives being brought in for the purpose of self-harm.

A case-by-case policy for knife crime was chosen due to:

4. **Low perceived level of risk:** Knife crime is not a major issue in the school compared to other safeguarding concerns. Delivery staff feel that the school environment feels much safer than previous schools they had worked in.
5. **Lack of alternative education provision:** No AP free schools or PRUs in the local area. The head teacher is therefore reluctant to permanently exclude pupils from the school. Instead, the focus is on pastoral support and educating pupils within school.

"We don't believe in zero tolerance; we are very inclusive in our practice and that doesn't mean that we have lower expectations. It means that we make judgments based on the circumstances. "

Strategic Lead, Secondary School, West Midlands

## Responding to knife crime incidents outside of school

Schools also discussed their responses to off-site knife crime incidents that involved their pupils. The immediate response to offsite incidents was generally considered to be the responsibility of the police and the pupil's parents/carers. However, schools varied in their approach to taking longer-term action.

Some schools treated off-site incidents in a similar way to on-site incidents when considering consequences for pupils. This was particularly the case if the pupil was on their way to or from school, in school uniform, or if multiple pupils from the school

were involved. In these scenarios, schools felt that incidents were 'bringing the school into disrepute' and therefore the school had a duty to take action. In case-by-case schools, this could be through internal isolations, fixed-term suspensions or mentoring. In zero-tolerance schools, they may permanently remove the pupil from the school following an offsite incident. However, the approach of zero-tolerance schools to offsite incidents was less consistent than for onsite incidents, as schools felt they had less power to enforce permanent exclusions, particularly if the pupil was not in school uniform at the time of the incident.

"One of our students was subjected to a really, really nasty assault. The fact it took place on a Friday evening, no one was in school uniform. You know, it didn't matter from that perspective." *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South-East*

In contrast, some schools did not sanction pupils based on off-site behaviour. These schools felt that dealing with off-site knife crime incidents was outside of their remit and should be dealt with by the police and other community agencies, such as social services. This was particularly the case when incidents occurred during evenings or at weekends.

"There has to be a point where it becomes parental responsibility, not mine." *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South East*

Schools may respond indirectly to offsite knife crime incidents by using knowledge of an offsite incident to help shape in-school preventative measures, both at a whole-school and targeted level. For example, by addressing the incident through PSHE sessions and assemblies, conducting random searches, and putting risk assessments in place for pupils who were involved in the offsite incident.

Even amongst schools who took limited action, strategic leads highlighted the importance of having strong relationships with community organisations. Communication between schools and police, social services and parents helped to facilitate the community's response to knife crime incidents by enabling efficient information-sharing. For example, parents may contact the school if they were concerned about an incident happening. The school could then pass this information onto the police. Local schools also communicated with each other to flag any concerns they may have about the potential for incidents between pupils from different schools, to try and prevent an incident before it happens.

"We'd got a student from another school who was regularly arriving. We found out their name and were able to liaise with other local schools" *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, Yorkshire*

# Implementing knife crime policy and practice

## Key findings

- Participating schools' implementation practices were rarely knife-crime specific and instead tended to be part of essential safeguarding work and behaviour management practices.
- Implementation practices targeted staff, pupils and parents/carers, but the core practices largely focused on staff training.

Strategic leads in schools were aware that they needed to effectively implement policy to ensure pupils and staff were safeguarded against knife crime. As with the policies themselves, schools' implementation practices were rarely knife-crime specific, instead relating to safeguarding and behaviour management practices more generally. These practices targeted: staff, pupils, and parents/carers. This section explores each of these in turn.

## Staff level implementation practices

School staff needed to be aware of, and engaged with, knife crime policies and practices for them to be effectively embedded. There were several ways in which strategic leads were implementing policies, including: training, reporting systems, knowledge sharing and offering support for staff.

**Schools commonly had extensive staff training in safeguarding**, with some of the training being directly relevant to knife crime policy and practice. All schools in the sample stated that all staff took part in annual statutory safeguarding training at the start of the school year. There was commonly additional training offered on top of this including training related to knife-adjacent issues such as county lines or drug and alcohol use. This tended to be specifically for safeguarding leads, but there were instances of wider staff accessing this too. Delivery staff felt that this was useful and relevant to knife crime. Additionally, in schools who perceived themselves as having higher need, Child Protection School Liaison officers or Early Help delivered training on safeguarding and referrals.

Training was considered time-intensive and was sometimes found to be de-prioritised in comparison to day-to-day tasks that staff had. To offset this risk, some schools made safeguarding training part of staff hours rather than part of continued professional development.

Generally, delivery staff involved in the research reported being satisfied with the training offered around knife crime. However, delivery group staff also said they relied on instinct, experience and pragmatism to inform their reaction to incidents.

Staff were also key in the information gathering process, and therefore having **clear reporting systems for immediate incidents and escalating safeguarding**

**concerns** was seen as crucial. This also extended to having a way to immediately call for support in case of an urgent incident.

"I try to make sure that you have that culture where if people are worried is your priority not to think about not to write me an e-mail, but to come and find me or someone from the safeguarding team and say I am generally worried this kid is carrying something, whatever that is, and we would take action as soon as we possibly could" *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, West Midlands*

**Knowledge sharing was essential in ensuring that practices were effectively implemented.** It consisted of regular communication with staff, including through forums to share information and best practice amongst colleagues. In some schools, additional information sharing came from the police and local authority (LA) about emerging risks and local issues. Some schools opted for a team structure which allowed safeguarding leads to work very closely together. For example, one school had an office shared by all the safeguarding leads. This allowed them to share knowledge and best practice around knife crime and work closely together to spot risks and support pupils.

Having **support for staff** was seen as essential in ensuring staff were able to implement knife crime policies. This involved having a mentor or buddy system and being attentive to staff mental health and wellbeing.

## Pupil level implementation practices

Schools saw **pupil engagement** as crucial to implementing knife crime practices. Most schools worked with pupils to ensure they knew **how to flag concerns** and gave them multiple ways to do so. Examples included worry boxes, anonymous reporting on the school website, having designated pastoral staff or safeguarding leads that pupils could talk to and in primary schools, having circle time, in which pupils were encouraged to contribute to discussions about their emotions. Schools ensured that pupils knew how to report by having posters throughout the school to ensure safeguarding leads were visible and known.

"The students talk to us. They know where we are and they know what to do"  
*Strategic Lead, Special School, Yorkshire*

Some schools also ensured they had **inclusive staff recruitment** which considered the demographics of pupils. These schools believed inclusive hiring built stronger relationships between pupils and staff, thus making it easier for pupils to report safeguarding concerns.

Some schools engaged in **mapping exercises** to better understand where pupils felt unsafe within school and in the local area. Working with pupils allowed staff to adapt knife crime prevention work to suit the needs of pupil and implement it more effectively.

## **Parent and carer level implementation practices**

Schools recognised that they needed parent/carers' buy in to increase the effectiveness of knife crime policies and practices. They primarily aimed to do this via information sharing to increase awareness about the issues faced and what the school's expectations were. For example, providing information on knife crime in parent bulletins or having a leaflet with knife-crime specific information aimed at parents on the school website.

However, schools' engagement with parents and carers in relation to knife crime was limited. Schools discussed difficulties with parental engagement more generally and felt that there was a lack of resources to support them with this. A discussion of how schools could be supported to better engage parents in safeguarding issues such as knife crime can be found on page 42.

## Further support for schools

### Key findings

- Schools identified gaps in support across a range of areas, including policy, resources and training, partnerships and pupil and parent/carer engagement.
- Guidance on policy and training for staff was a particular area where strategic leads felt they could receive more support.
- Strategic leads highlighted the need for more clarity around the role the school should take in safeguarding pupils, versus the role of other organisations such as the police and social services.
- Further support for schools in engaging with parents and carers was seen as crucial to effectively identifying and dealing with the risk of knife crime.

Schools identified gaps in guidance around dealing with knife crime across various areas, including policy, training and pupil engagement. In some instances, schools felt that gaps should be addressed by the DfE, in other cases there were multiple ways in which gaps could be addressed, and this requires further research.

### Policy

Strategic staff within schools felt confident in developing school-specific policy that reflected the needs of their pupils. They considered themselves experts in their local context and pupil needs.

However, they thought that a greater level of clarity and guidance on scenarios would be useful in helping them to frame some of their knife-crime related policies. The following areas were highlighted as requiring more clarity from DfE in national-level guidance:

- The use of search and restraint when a pupil is suspected of having a knife on premises.
- The role of schools in responding to an off-site incident.
- How to prioritise resources in line with national priorities.

A review of the 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' guidance to include knife-crime related content was also flagged by school staff as an area which should be a priority for DfE to take forward.

### Resources and training

Additional resources and training were highlighted consistently by school staff to build confidence in preventing and responding to knife crime incidents. Responses from strategic leads also highlighted the need for more guidance around the use of effective interventions.



Schools perceived PSHE sessions to be an effective way of building knife crime education into the curriculum. Strategic leads therefore discussed how they felt that schools would benefit from more guidance about how to engage with pupils about knife crime within the PSHE curriculum, without elevating concerns of both pupils and parents unnecessarily.

However, there is a lack of evidence to suggest that knife crime education programmes are effective at reducing violence<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, it may be most useful for schools to be provided with additional resources and guidance outlining effective knife crime interventions, with access to the evidence base showing the impact that different interventions have on pupils. This guidance could be provided by organisations such as DfE and YEF.

“How do we, as school leaders know what's on offer to us from the DfE Department?... How do the DfE coordinate the efforts across the region and the nation?” *Strategic lead, Secondary School, North East*

Schools consistently discussed how staff were time poor and had many competing priorities. They thought it was time consuming to search through different sources find organisations that may be able to provide the support they needed. A ‘one-stop shop’ portal of national and local organisations and knife crime resources was suggested by strategic leads to address this gap.

Some schools thought that resources and training were not always up to date with advice from educational psychologists. This gap may be addressed by having better integration of input from psychologists and NHS Mental Health Leads when designing training materials and resources.

## Funding

Schools had to make decisions on how to spend budgets and which safeguarding issues to prioritise. Some schools felt it would be helpful to ringfence funding for pastoral teams. This could also be a specific DfE funded pot specifically targeted at funding pastoral care within schools, this would help with budget prioritisation. Similarly, strategic leads would like to see more guidance and direction on where to prioritise funding in terms of safeguarding activities to align with national priorities.

Schools also felt they would benefit from funding for additional support including external, high-quality training and partnerships. This would require external services like social services, CAMHS and the police to be better funded, to be able to engage in effective partnership working with schools.

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<sup>3</sup> Youth Endowment Fund (2023) *Knife crime education programmes*. Youth Endowment Fund. <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/knife-crime-education-programmes/>.

"What the DfE could do is putting funding back into those more preventative aspects and you know the local community police officers." *Strategic Lead, Special School, West Midlands*

## Staff support

Delivery staff discussed how they would benefit from clearer guidance on how staff should be dealing with knife crime incidents and what exactly their role is. Some staff were unclear on the extent to which they should be putting themselves at risk to deal with incidents and ensure the safety of pupils. This was particularly the case for offsite incidents, with some staff not knowing how much they should act to intervene.

Additionally, strategic leads in higher risk schools felt that there was a lack of support for staff's mental health and wellbeing at a national level. They suggested that DfE could provide resources and signposting to support staff who may have had to deal with knife crime incidents or other difficult issues within school. Schools felt that an additional layer of wellbeing support would enable staff to better fulfil their safeguarding duties.

"I don't think there's anything that DfE do or certainly nothing that we've heard of...there's no reach out from the DfE saying do you know what we know life gets tough sometimes. Here's a way in which you can we can give you support." *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, South-East*

## Partnerships

Schools highly valued the partnerships they had with community agencies and other local schools. However, they felt that more could be done to facilitate these partnerships.

Many schools thought that more support from the police would be beneficial when dealing with knife crime incidents. They felt that more clarity was needed as to when an incident should be dealt with internally and when it should become a police matter. Schools also discussed how the reinstatement of designated police officers whose role was to support the school (e.g. Safer Schools Officers) would help schools to feel better supported when dealing with incidents. However, schools acknowledged that the reduction in this support in recent years is likely due to services becoming increasingly stretched.

"I would have liked more support I think from the police. Although it's below the legal limit, it could still actually have really harmed somebody - it had a serrated edge and all sorts. And I just think that actually it would have been nice to have a little bit more support from them." *Strategic Lead, Primary School, London*

As well as strengthening partnerships with the police, schools discussed how they would benefit from more joined-up working with other local schools to share knowledge and keep the community safer. Local authorities could help facilitate this by organising meetings or workshops with safeguarding leads from local schools and supporting schools to develop information-sharing networks.

Finally, schools would like to see clearer and simpler referral pathways for at-risk pupils. This included for services such as CAMHS and social services. They felt that pupils who the school had identified as at-risk were not always able to receive support, as they did not meet certain thresholds set by these organisations. Unless an incident had occurred, schools felt it was unlikely that the pupil would get any support. One special primary school also suggested that more provision was required for younger pupils specifically (aged 7-9) as they cannot be referred to organisations such as Youth Justice.

## **Pupil engagement**

The schools who participated in the research felt that it would be useful to have more support for effectively engaging with pupils around the topic of knife crime. For example, lived-experience speakers who used real stories about how their life was impacted by knife crime and mentors who could act as skilled facilitators in group sessions were generally seen by those interviewed to be an effective way of engaging with pupils who were at a higher risk of knife crime involvement. However, schools were limited in the amount of this they were able to provide. As well as additional funding for sessions with these groups, schools would benefit from a centralised list of external organisations who provided this kind of support. This could be done at both the local level, potentially provided by local authorities, and the national level, provided by DfE.

Primary schools also discussed how there was a lack of guidance around how to speak to younger pupils and pupils with additional needs about knife crime. They felt that it was still important to educate pupils on the risks of knife crime, but that it could be difficult to do this to an appropriate level of detail. In general, primary schools felt that they received less knife-crime related support as they were generally perceived to be lower risk. Some schools felt that this was proportional to the risk level, but others felt that more should be done, such as having access to a range of resources adapted to different ages and risk levels.

## **Parent/carers engagement**

Schools shared how they felt there was a lack of provision and resources available to help them engage with parents and carers around knife crime. They highlighted that the relationship between schools and parents was crucial to effectively identifying and dealing with risk of knife crime, but that there was sometimes a lack of understanding from parents. Schools suggested that sessions such as

psychological wellbeing and parenting courses delivered by local services may help parents better understand their role in the safeguarding of their children.

“a lot of the parents will refuse to believe what their child is getting involved with sometimes through fear. but yeah, it's it's getting them in. Having open conversations with them and then maybe signposting to additional support as well. Like we can do early help assessments in school. We've got family support worker, but also we can signpost to other areas as well.” *Strategic Lead, Secondary School, West Midlands*

# Summary of key findings

## Key findings

### Knife crime context

Knife crime was not perceived as a discrete issue for schools to tackle. Instead, it was perceived to be part of a wider ecosystem of safeguarding concerns such as gang culture, anti-social behaviour, and mental health. Schools therefore rarely had standalone knife crime policies, instead embedding them into broader safeguarding procedures.

Staff highlighted that their role in safeguarding had become broader to include responsibilities previously held by social services and the police. They also thought that the scale and extent of safeguarding issues within their schools were increasing. This had put constraints on internal capacity to respond to concerns. This was a trend they anticipated would continue.

Schools did have concerns about incidents within school, but thought they were more likely to occur outside of school. This was because pupils felt less 'watched' by adults and therefore less likely to get caught. Despite this, concerns about on-site incidents were increasing, meaning that schools thought they may need stricter and more knife-crime specific policies going forward.

### Prevention and response

There was a wide variety of knife crime prevention activities across schools. However, schools were not able to do every activity they would like due to funding constraints, limited staff and external organisation capacity and the need to prioritise other safeguarding issues. Therefore, strategic leads had to make decisions about what prevention activities to do based on their perceptions of the level of risk the school was at, as well as the risk of individual pupils.

The level of whole school risk was determined by factors such as:

- School type – whether the school was mainstream, or alternative provision including PRU determined the extent of activity.
- Contextual safeguarding issues – where a school's local area and community had high incidents of anti-social behaviour, gang activity and drug use, schools tended to perceive themselves at a higher risk of knife-related incidents.
- Relationships with the police – where relationships were less positive, risk was perceived to be higher and so more targeted activities were commonly found.
- Risk prioritisation – safeguarding teams had to assess which safeguarding issues the school faced, and which ones needed to be focused on. Where knife crime was lower priority, less targeted activities may be found.

Pupil level risk was determined by interlinking factors. Those at higher risk tended to include a combination of the following:

- Pupils with mental health issues.
- Pupils with SEND or SEMH needs.
- Pupils regularly using alcohol and/or drugs.
- Pupils more broadly at risk of criminal exploitation
- Pupils who perceive carrying a knife as a status symbol.
- Pupils who perceive knives as a form of protection.
- Pupils who may have the opportunity to mimic knife carrying behaviour from friends or family.

When a knife crime incident occurred on-site, schools tended to follow a similar process for responding to incidents on-site. This involved detection, information gathering, involving external stakeholders and then making a final decision.

Schools employed one of two approaches. Schools with better local provision for excluded pupils and those perceiving themselves as higher risk sometimes took a zero-tolerance approach. This meant any involvement with knife crime resulted in permanent exclusion. Others took a case-by-case approach. These schools were more commonly schools who had a high proportion of pupils with high need and vulnerability, schools with a low level of perceived risk and schools who had capacity to offer support for pupils.

## **Implementation and additional support required**

Schools' implementation practices tended to be part of essential safeguarding work. The core implementation practices focused on staff training. In the schools interviewed, staff tended to be satisfied with their schools' policies/practices on identifying risk and responding to school incidents. Given that schools were recruited based on having previously dealt with knife crime incidents, they may be more likely to be engaging with proactive training sessions, on top of what is required. There were also activities aimed at making pupils feel comfortable talking to staff about potential incidents.

Schools did require some additional support. This included:

- Some further guidance from DfE on knife crime specific policy such as the use of search and restraint and how they should respond to off-site incidents. They also welcomed guidance on how to speak with younger pupils around knife crime.
- Making it easier for schools to locate external support provision through a one-stop-shop for local and national resources in this area.
- Providing additional wellbeing support for staff who had been involved in incidents.
- Providing more clarity as to when an incident should be dealt with internally and when it should become a police matter. Schools also discussed how the reinstatement of designated police officers whose role was to support the

school (e.g. Safer Schools Officers) would help schools to feel better supported when dealing with incidents.

- Further support in engaging with parents/carers and the wider local community about knife crime to involve them in the response.

## Potential areas for further research

The research identified areas that would benefit from further exploration, some of which have been outlined below.

**Understanding perceptions of pupils:** We now understand the perceptions of teachers, and what teachers report that pupils think about knife crime and the policies in place. However, it would be useful to explore this with young people themselves.

**Parents:** Insight on what barriers prevent parental engagement with schools on knife crime issues – both with parents' own children and more generally as a community.

**Partnerships and services:** A landscape mapping exercise focusing on defining the organisations and actors (in addition to schools) who can intervene to support young people at risk of/already involved in knife crime.

**Police:** More insight on perspective on their role within schools, given the misalignment of perceptions of roles and responsibilities found.

**Outcomes:** More insight on outcomes for pupils in zero tolerance vs case by case schools.

**Case studies of successful interventions:** Particularly where schools have diverted pupils away from knife crime.



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