THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS: BEST MENTORING PRACTICES TO EMPOWER YOUNG PEOPLE AND INSPIRE PROFESSIONALS IN THE UK_

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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

The Power of Relationships
Strong, consistent, and well-supported mentoring relationships, where young people take an active role, have a profound impact on their confidence, aspirations, and opportunities. Effective mentoring is not just about guidance—it's about trust, support, and mutual growth.

Flexibility in Mentoring Approaches Leads to Better Outcomes
There is no one-size-fits-all model for mentoring. The best programmes adapt to young people's needs by balancing goal-setting with relationship-building, allowing for organic and meaningful development.

Young people Agency and Empowerment Must Be at the Core
Mentoring should empower young people as active agents in their development. Giving mentees decision-making power in shaping their mentoring experience—such as choosing their mentors, setting goals, and leading projects—ensures they are fully engaged and benefit more deeply from the process.

Equity and Inclusion Strengthen Mentoring

Mentoring is most impactful when it actively addresses social inequalities. Diversifying mentor recruitment, embedding cultural awareness, and adopting trauma-informed practices make mentoring more inclusive and effective for all young people.

Collaboration is Essential for Sustainable Mentoring

Effective mentoring goes beyond one-on-one relationships. Strong partnerships with schools, community groups, public services and other mentoring organisations ensure long-term support for young people and create a more sustainable mentoring ecosystem.

Investment in Mentoring Infrastructure is Crucial

For mentoring to reach its full potential, sustained funding, professional development for staff, and innovative approaches—such as digital mentoring and AI-enhanced support—are needed to scale high-quality mentoring across the UK.

Expanding Mentoring Models Increases Impact

Traditional one-on-one mentoring is valuable, but expanding models—such as peer mentoring, group mentoring, and hybrid digital approaches—help reach more young people and build broader networks of support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth mentoring plays a role in supporting young people personal, educational, and professional development across the United Kingdom (UK). Commissioned by The Diana Award (TDA), this report brings together research, best practices, and insights from experts and those directly involved in mentoring. By analysing existing evidence alongside real-world experiences, **we have identified the most effective practices that consistently contribute to successful youth mentoring.** The report also outlines future directions for the sector, offering recommendations to strengthen mentoring collaborations, establish a shared understanding of mentoring, and enhance advocacy efforts. By working with a unified voice, the sector can build a stronger, more cohesive mentoring ecosystem that maximises its impact on young people in the UK.

Navigating This Report
This report is structured into three chapters, each offering key insights and real-world examples to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth mentoring in the UK.

CHAPTER 1: HOW THIS REPORT WAS MADE
With Chapter One, you will **gain insight into the background of this report,** its purpose, and the contributors who made it possible. It describes the research methodology, including literature reviews, expert interviews, and focus groups.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT WE FOUND – BUILDING STRONGER MENTORING SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
If you are looking for practical recommendations and future directions, Chapter 2 provides guidance on best practices and recommendations to strengthen mentoring programmes. It explores the importance of strong mentor-mentee relationships, flexible goal-setting, comprehensive mentor training, and collaboration with schools and community organisations. Additionally, it highlights the role of equity, trauma-informed approaches, and long-term sustainability in delivering high-quality mentoring.

CHAPTER 3: HOW DID WE GET HERE? UNDERSTANDING THE YOUTH MENTORING LANDSCAPE IN THE UK
If you are new to the topic, we recommend starting with Chapter 3, which explores the historical and international context of youth mentoring and its multiple applications. This will help you understand how mentoring has evolved and why it is a powerful tool for supporting young people, particularly those at risk of becoming Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). This broader perspective provides valuable insight into the sector's current challenges and opportunities.

Together, these chapters serve as a roadmap for policymakers, practitioners, and funders to enhance mentoring services, strengthen partnerships, and support young people more effectively. Whether you are an experienced professional or new to the field, this report is designed to be an accessible and valuable resource for improving mentoring in the UK.

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CHAPTER 1: HOW THIS REPORT WAS MADE

1. Who Made This Report Possible?

This report represents a collaborative effort, and its completion would not have been possible without the contributions and support of numerous individuals and organisations who have voluntarily shared their knowledge, practices, and challenges to help us illustrate the current state of mentoring in the United Kingdom (UK).

Funders of the Report

We thank the **Youth Futures Foundation**, whose funding has made this report possible. Their commitment to a society where all young people, regardless of their background, can fulfil their potential aligns with the vision behind this report.

Commissioned by **The Diana Award (TDA),** this report reflects Princess Diana's belief in young people's ability to enact positive change. With this report, TDA seeks to identify mentoring best practices in youth mentoring services and unite the British field towards capacity building and collaboration.

Partners and Organisations

TDA plays a facilitative role in supporting the Informal Network of Mentoring Organisations[1] (the Informal Mentoring Network), a collaborative group of diverse mentoring partners from across the UK. We are immensely grateful to the numerous members of the Informal Mentoring Network, practitioners, experts, mentors, and mentees[2] who have shared their insights, data, and experiences. Their contributions have enriched this report with practical perspectives and actionable recommendations. We would like to especially thank Access Project, Cranfield Trust, Brightside, Career Ready, City Year, Football Beyond Borders, Girl's Network, Inspiring Scotland, Kids Network, Lifeline, One Million Mentors, Open University, Scottish Mentoring Network, The Diana Award, Volunteer Matters, YMCA Scotland, and the Youth Employment Foundation (YEF) for dedicating their time and sharing valuable best practices.

[1] The informal network of mentoring organisations (the Informal Mentoring Network) was created in mid-2023, after the need for it was identified during a networking and discussion session with the APPG on Mentoring. The Network provides a platform for organisations to share ideas and challenges and to identify clear asks and messaging to bring to parliamentarians at APPG Meetings. The Network is made up of representatives from a range of organisations that deliver mentoring interventions, as well as academics with expertise in mentoring.

[2] The individual receiving mentoring, also referred to as protégé(e) or apprentice.

The Authors

This report results from the collaboration between mentoring consultants **Fiona Soler Harroche** and **Fernanda Garza Gorostiza.**

Fiona[3] brings over ten years of experience in mentoring, working with diverse international partners to design tailored solutions that create a positive impact on society. She applies a systemic approach to mentoring interventions, ensuring that programmes are effective and adaptable to the evolving needs of those they serve. Her expertise in evidence-based programme development, strategic partnership building, policy design and advocacy contributes to the insights presented in this report, ensuring that the recommendations are practical and relevant to the field.

Fernanda's[4] contributions brought additional depth and precision to this report. Her dedication to fostering meaningful change for young people and her expertise working in youth mentoring and education initiatives in France and the UK have contributed to ensuring the relevance and quality of this work.

2. Mentoring Matters Today

Background

The Diana Award stands as a testament to Princess Diana's belief that young people have the power to change the world for the better. As a leading organisation in the UK mentoring landscape, TDA has championed initiatives that foster personal development, build self-confidence, and equip young people with the skills necessary to thrive in education, careers, and society.

Established through the **All-Party Parliamentary Group**[5] **(APPG) on Mentoring** in mid-2023, the Informal Mentoring Network provides a platform for organisations to share insights, address challenges, and formulate collective messaging for parliamentary advocacy. In collaboration with this network, TDA commissioned this report on best practices in youth mentoring to enhance the impact of mentoring interventions and offer quality-driven experiences for young people. This joint initiative works to

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[4] For more information on the second author's profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/fernanda-garza-gorostiza/

[5] All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) are informal cross-party groups that have no official status within Parliament. They are run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords, though many choose to involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities. The Diana Award previously served as secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Mentoring. They are now in the process of re-establishing the APPG on Mentoring following the general election.

strengthen the mentoring ecosystem and ensure diverse voices are represented in shaping the sector's future.

Whilst mentoring has gained significant momentum across Europe—becoming embedded in public policies as part of large government initiatives to tackle young people inclusion[6] and through European collaborations to develop shared policy frameworks[7]—the UK mentoring field remains detached from its European counterparts and, at times, siloed. There is a need for well-defined, evidence-based practices that can be applied, along with a coordinated effort across organisations to align with broader European advancements in mentoring.

Purposes and Goals

To address this gap, this report aims to unite the field, strengthen mentoring initiatives, and amplify their impact. It is a significant step forward for TDA and the Informal Mentoring Network, as well as the entire UK mentoring sector and the young people it serves. Therefore, this report seeks to achieve the following goals:

- Identify the young people (aged 11–18) who would benefit most from mentoring interventions and clarify their unique needs.
- Differentiate between young people-oriented interventions to enhance understanding and implementation.
- Highlight the skills and advice mentoring should provide for young people in the 21st century, including career and personal development.
- Evaluate the link between mentoring interventions, skills development, and economic growth.
- Investigate the long-term benefits of mentoring on educational success, employability, and personal growth.
- Embed a social justice lens, addressing systemic barriers and fostering inclusivity for underrepresented groups.
- Strengthen the Informal Mentoring Network by promoting knowledge exchange and partnerships.

Scope

This report focuses on mentoring interventions targeting **young people aged 11-18,** explicitly supporting career and educational development whilst building self-confidence and fostering personal growth. The report also incorporates a **social justice lens**, recognising the importance of addressing systemic barriers and promoting equity within mentoring programmes. By examining how mentoring can empower

[6] For more information see: https://www.1jeune1mentor.fr/
[7] For more information see: https://www.mentoringeurope.eu/position-paper-mentoring-in-europe-towards-and-inclusive-society-connecting-cultures-and-generations/

underrepresented groups and dismantle structural inequalities, this report aligns with the broader goal of fostering social mobility[8] and inclusivity for all young people. This report provides a **roadmap for mentoring organisations** to create impactful, equitable, and sustainable mentoring interventions in the UK and beyond by combining evidence and practical recommendations.

3. What We Did: Listening To Those Who Know Best

Approach from the Authors

We adopted a **principle-driven approach**[9], leveraging insights from research, focus groups, and interviews with practitioners, mentors and mentees to capture a nuanced understanding of effective mentoring practices in the UK. As the report recognises the complexity of mentoring interventions, it suggests **recommendations** for diverse needs and contexts.

With our combined expertise and systemic approach to mentoring, this report identifies actionable solutions and supports broader collaboration within the field, including amongst members of the Informal Mentoring Network.

Theory of Change Guiding This Report

We created a Theory of Change for this report that details the safe assumptions made based on existing knowledge. This Theory of Change states that effective mentoring interventions, a collaborative mentoring network, and advocacy for systemic change contribute to improved youth outcomes, social mobility, and inclusivity. This framework underpins the recommendations presented in this report[10].

Influences of This Report

This report draws on several foundational influences:

- Evidence from mentoring research with a commitment to integrating a **social justice lens**.
- Research on the **UK mentoring landscape**, tackling NEET[11] young people challenges and the role of mentoring in enhancing social mobility.

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[8] The ability for individuals or groups to move upward in socioeconomic status, often through access to education, employment, and resources.

[9] Principles guide without dictating how programmes should function, thereby recognising the diversity of contexts and empowering mentoring programmes. With this approach programmes can adapt whilst advancing towards their objectives without being hampered by rigid guidelines.

[10] A detailed breakdown of the Theory of Change can be found in Annex 1.

[11] In the United Kingdom, a person is classified as NEET (Not in education, employment or training) if they are aged 16 to 24 years and are not participating in any form of education, employment, or training.

- Real-life examples from leading UK mentoring organisations and insights from the Informal Mentoring Network.

Method for the Literature Review

Mentoring interventions evolve based on the needs of the people they serve and the realities in which they occur. This is why mentoring interventions reflect the social and political realities where they exist (Best, 2017). Therefore, the literature review aimed to understand the best practices in youth mentoring globally and in the UK. We analysed the characteristics of mentoring programmes and young people realities in the UK to identify evidence and knowledge gaps. Materials were compiled in an Excel database and organised into "Global" and "UK-specific" categories to differentiate findings and identify areas of overlap or divergence.

The review adopted a dual-focus methodology:

1. **Global Perspective:** Research from countries with seasoned mentoring sectors, such as the United States and Canada, was analysed to extract insights on the social and economic impact of mentoring, programme design, and implementation. European studies were included to explore regional approaches, such as mentoring for social integration. This global perspective highlighted research areas that could benefit the UK mentoring field, including measuring mentoring's social impact.
2. **UK Perspective:** The review examined the evolution of mentoring within the UK, its integration within the young people services spectrum, and its potential to address national challenges such as NEET young people and social mobility disparities. We examined historical and current research and contributions from mentoring organisations to define the scope of mentoring services, their strengths and areas of improvement.

The data has been collected from various sources, including peer-reviewed academic journals, policy documents and reports from government bodies and non-profit organisations, case studies and evaluations from mentoring programmes globally and within the UK.

Method For Field Study and Community Involvement

The best practice research process included:

- Interviews: Conducted in-depth, one-on-one conversations with professionals from 16 different organisations within the Informal Mentoring Network to gather qualitative insights.
- Focus Groups: Organised four focus groups with mentors and programme staff to explore diverse perspectives.

We collected data through interviews and focus groups, using a mix of

methods. This included semi-structured interviews where participants could share their experiences and information from existing mentoring programmes. We then analysed the responses by identifying common themes and patterns. To make sure our findings were accurate and relevant, we compared them with our conclusions from the literature review.

Report Calendar

The report was completed over eight months, with the following key stages:

- June-July-August 2024: Literature review, identification of stakeholders and initial one-on-one interviews to formulate the first hypothesis.
- September-October-November 2024: Field studies, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and data collection. Commencement of report writing.
- December 2024: Analysis and synthesis of findings. Finalising the main chapters of the report.
- January 2025: Drafting the report, obtaining stakeholder feedback, and showcasing results.

Ethics and Data Protection

The research adhered to the following ethical standards:

- Informed Consent: All participants were briefed on the purpose of the research and provided consent.
- Anonymity and Confidentiality: Personal identifiers were removed to protect participant privacy.
- Data Security: Data was securely stored and only accessible to authorised researchers.

Evaluation Limitations

Despite efforts to ensure a comprehensive approach, this evaluation faced several limitations that readers should be aware of for transparency and future reference improvement:

- **Participant Diversity:** Whilst efforts were made to engage diverse voices across mentoring organisations, logistical constraints meant that not all organisations in the Informal Mentoring Network could be included. This sample limited the representation of the full spectrum of mentoring programmes across the UK.
- **Geographic Representation:** The study primarily involved urban and densely populated organisations. As a result, mentoring programmes from rural and remote regions were underrepresented, which may have restricted insights into the unique challenges and opportunities in these areas.
- **Stakeholder Representation:** Although we aimed to include a range of stakeholders, the field study lacked representation from key

groups such as funders, corporations, and public policy representatives. Their absence limited the report's ability to connect mentoring practices with broader political and corporate agendas.

- **Mentor and Mentee Representation:** Whilst we successfully engaged some mentors[12], their perspectives were not as broadly represented as desired. Despite the efforts, we did not manage to engage directly with mentees. This sample limited the diversity of experiences and insights into the mentor-mentee relationship within different programme settings.
- **Time Constraints for the Project:** The eight-month timeline restricted opportunities for longitudinal analysis and a more in-depth exploration of long-term mentoring outcomes.

The report aims to provide a transparent and realistic view of its scope by acknowledging these limitations. These constraints highlight areas for further collaboration, research, and stakeholder engagement to ensure future studies and initiatives provide an even more comprehensive understanding of the UK mentoring landscape. Despite these challenges, the findings offer a valuable foundation for improving youth mentoring practices and advocating for greater collaboration and inclusion across the sector.

[12] The individual supporting, guiding and helping another, usually more inexperienced, individual. Sometimes referred to as 'volunteers'.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT WE FOUND – BUILDING STRONGER MENTORING SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

4. What Makes a Programme Work: Best Practices for Effective Youth Mentoring in the UK

Mentoring programmes exist and interact with their surroundings, and the strength of those surroundings affects how well these programmes work (Colley, 2003). Colley highlights the need to consider the context of mentoring within policies and social inequalities, stressing that mentoring is connected to the factors around participants. This connection shows that mentoring organisations operate within a system with multiple stakeholders—like schools, community groups, businesses, policymakers, and funders—whose interactions influence the mentoring environment (Raithelhuber, 2023). These relationships are interdependent: mentoring programmes need a strong environment to succeed, while stakeholders and society as a whole gain from the positive results of mentoring initiatives.

This report aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of mentoring programmes and their ecosystems. Therefore, the following section presents best practices[13] for creating robust environments where quality youth mentoring can thrive. These best practices come from a thorough review of literature and insights gained from interviews and focus groups involving UK mentoring professionals and participants[14].

We remind readers that every mentoring programme exists successfully within its specific context. For these best practices to be effectively implemented, the context must be appropriate, and the conditions for success must align to ensure its efficacy.

1 Build Consistent and Stable Relationships

What the research tells us is that long-term, reliable connections are vital for fostering trust, providing emotional support, and ensuring the positive impact of mentoring (Comfort, 2024). Research highlights that consistency is crucial in allowing mentoring relationships[15] to develop into meaningful, stable connections that benefit both mentees and mentors. Brady et al. (2017) emphasised that structured mentoring relationships, when sustained over time, can transition into strong, informal support systems that foster

[13] See "2. Best practices structure presentation" in Annex 2
[14] See methodology on section 3 of this report.
[15] The relationship between the mentor and mentee; in the case of this report, the relationship which has been created through the mentoring programme.

long-term well-being.

Key aspects include:

- Being clear about the programme's expectations for mentees and mentors.
- Allowing time to build trust between mentee and mentor.
- Ensuring regular interactions to build a foundation of respect and reliability.
- Providing support from mentors, e.g. through regular check-ins, a mentoring coordinator available for support, and a mentor's guide.

Outcomes: Consistent and stable relationships with mentees and mentors increase the overall engagement of mentees and mentors and the desired goals.
Favourable context: Before launching the programme, mentoring services have carefully considered the change they aim to achieve. They have designed the service with sufficient resources and well-structured processes to support their goals effectively. The programme has also been tested and refined based on user feedback to ensure it meets their needs and delivers meaningful impact.
In practice: City Year's mentors incorporate a "check-in, check-out" segment in their weekly sessions with mentees. Each week, the mentor and mentee check in and talk about the mentee's progress and how they are doing. Then, they check out and discuss their next steps and session. This gives mentees consistency and a clear expectation for their sessions.
Football Beyond Borders highlights the necessity of clear scheduling and contracting in mentoring relationships:

> **"Clear acknowledgement of the availability of the mentor and when [the mentoring action] will take place, there being some kind of contracting that goes on to ensure there's consistency in the relationship is essential in building trust."**

Similarly, **Volunteer Matters** stresses the importance of an initial phase dedicated solely to establishing trust before goal-setting begins:

> **"Those first few months are just actually about showing up "I'm going to be here every week; I'm going to have a coffee with you every week. We're going to have a chat.". We don't start the goal setting until after those months. After they feel comfortable."**

YMCA Scotland's mentoring cycle lasts 12 months, with the first 3 months focused solely on trust and relationship building. The duo then moves to action plan/goal-setting, implementation and phasing out support. This

allows enough time to build a strong foundation in long-term mentoring programmes:

> **"No pressure about goals, it takes time to create a relationship"**

2 Flexibility in Goal-Setting

What the research tells us is that successful mentoring programmes find a balance between goal-oriented and relationship-oriented strategies. As the mentor-mentee relationship evolves, so should the goals, ensuring they remain current with the mentee's changing needs and aspirations (Comfort, 2024). Research suggests that goal setting is a crucial component of mentoring, helping to structure the relationship while maintaining the flexibility needed for mentee-led development. Cavell et al. (2021) proposes a functional typology of mentoring relationships, differentiating between those that are goal-driven, focusing on problem-solving and life transitions, and those that are relationship-driven, where the primary purpose is the connection itself. These perspectives highlight the diversity of mentoring approaches, showing that while some programmes prioritise achieving specific milestones, others value the relationship as an outcome in its own right.

Volunteer Matters illustrates a problem-focused model, with structured goal setting distinguishing it from befriending[16]:

> **"Without goal setting, without trying to achieve goals, you're just befriending. Some of our young people transition into befriending, and that's fine. But they're not mentoring anymore because they're not doing that goal-setting. Goal-setting is a big part of it."**

Conversely, **One Million Mentors** present a relationship-driven approach, where mentoring primarily fosters emotional support, social connection, and a sense of belonging. The relationship itself holds intrinsic value beyond specific objectives:

> **"Mentoring has goals, but the relationship is a goal in itself. It can create and develop social cohesion."**

Both viewpoints underscore the need for flexibility in mentoring. While structured goal-setting can provide clarity and direction, recognising the value of the relationship itself can enhance mentee engagement and long-

[16] A relationship between two or more individuals which is initiated, supported and monitored by an agency that
has defined one or more parties as likely to benefit ideally the relationship is non-judgemental, mutual and purposeful and there is a commitment over time (Philip and Spratt, 2007).

term impact. Ultimately, the effectiveness of mentoring depends on how well it aligns with the needs and aspirations of the mentee, whether through a defined path of achievement or by fostering a meaningful, supportive connection.

Some key aspects include:

- Co-creating goals with mentees.
- Focusing on soft outcomes (self-esteem, behaviour) and hard outcomes (academic performance).

Outcomes: By having flexible goals, mentees are more likely to stay focused and motivated, which increases their engagement and chances of achieving those goals.

Favourable context: Training for mentors on how to set goals with mentees can be helpful. Funding with flexibility on key performance indicators and that considers the qualitative impact of mentoring.

In practice: Football Beyond Borders emphasises co-creating mentees' goals with their mentors. Once the pair has established trust and gotten to know each other better, they collaborate during sessions to set goals and plan how to achieve them. The organisation highlights the importance of developing mentoring relationships before diving into goal setting:

> **"Wouldn't necessarily always be linked to their goals and targets in the initial sessions, but you would hopefully be working towards that once the relationship is established."**

Similarly, **Brightside** acknowledges that goal setting must be a gradual process, evolving as mentees gain confidence:

> **"We say to mentors "this is going to have to start as probably you leading". [Mentees] might be more nervous about this experience. You can't expect that agency from them on day one. But you do need to allow it to become more 50/50."**

These insights reinforce that while mentoring relationships should begin with a focus on trust and rapport, goal-setting remains a fundamental aspect that should naturally develop as the relationship progresses.

3 Strengthen Mentor Training and Supervision

What the research tells us is that effective mentoring begins with a strong foundation of training for mentors, which should cover key areas such as empathy, cultural awareness, boundaries, and safeguarding (Philip and Spratt, 2007) (Armitage et al., 2020). McQuillin et al. (2019) recommend offering training to mentors on a "Just in time" basis rather than a "Just in case" approach. This involves anticipating mentors' requirements and

delivering the necessary training right before they need it rather than overwhelming them with information upfront. Mentors have reported finding more value in this timely training, leading to increased usage of the suggested content and materials from the organisation (McQuillin et al., 2019).

Volunteer Matters highlights the importance of balancing structured training with flexibility, ensuring mentors have sufficient guidance while allowing mentee agency:

> **"Support, training and resources for mentors is very important. Without being prescriptive but more of a guidance document so it can still be kind of child young people led and enabling mentee agency."**

Mentors face various challenges, particularly in maintaining the engagement and motivation of their mentees. During focus groups, one mentor shared their experience of navigating the difficulties mentees face in school:

> **"Our challenge at the moment is how to keep them engaged and positive when actually they've got such an awful thing going on around them in school. We just have to try our best to give them that reassurance [...].It's really difficult for the schools as well, and just try and bring them up a little bit by giving them that little bit of encouragement."**

Key aspects include:

- Providing initial training to mentors on empathy, cultural awareness, their role and limits as mentors, and safeguarding.
- Knowing your mentor's needs beforehand and providing them with ongoing training.
- Providing spaces where mentors can exchange ideas with other mentors and learn from each other. Provide a variety of formats.
- Embedding feedback loops for mentors to improve the quality of their training and supervision, making sure it stays relevant and reflects their needs.

Outcomes: Well-trained and engaged mentors increase the overall satisfaction and impact of the mentor's and mentee's experience. Well-prepared mentors are more equipped to support their mentees effectively, significantly influencing positive young people outcomes.

Favourable context: Resources and staff are needed to train mentors and provide regular follow-up with mentors. Maintaining consistent communication with mentors and ensuring regular supervision to anticipate their needs.

In practice: YMCA Scotland provides their mentors with extensive initial training covering key themes around mentoring while also offering continuous training tailored to their mentees' specific needs. This includes training in healthy detachment and addressing the specific needs of a young person, ensuring that mentors remain responsive and adaptable throughout the mentoring process.

Similarly, **Career Ready** also provides their mentors UK wide with well-rounded support, including initial trainings, FAQs, voluntary bi-monthly regional mentor meets-ups and additional information sessions throughout the year on topics related to their mentee's day to day, such as UCAS application, student finance and apprenticeship. They also have access to an online portal to log their student meetings, find resources and access training.

Finally, ensuring that mentoring programmes offer structured, yet flexible supervision is key. **Inspiring Scotland** emphasises that supervision allows staff members to connect and support both mentors and mentees:

> **"Supervision is not just about safeguarding; it's also about reflective practice—ensuring that mentors are coping with their role and that the young person is getting the right support. Mentoring programmes should be flexible but also ensure that where additional support is needed, mentors can reach out to others and not feel they have to handle everything alone."**

4 Mentor recruitment, attraction, retention and recognition

What the research tells us is that recruiting and retaining high-quality and engaged mentors is vital for the success and stability of a mentoring programme. (Philip and Spratt, 2007). A well-designed mentor recruitment and retention strategy not only ensures consistency in mentoring relationships but also strengthens long-term programme impact.

Mentoring programmes in the UK may recruit paid mentors, often young people workers who work full-time, volunteers, or both. This depends on the organisation's business model and structure and directly impacts the recruitment, engagement and retention of mentors.

Volunteer Matters highlights the importance of retention and continuity, noting the risks of mentor turnover and the loss of the knowledge built throughout the experience:

> **"The problem of always starting off with new mentors means the loss of knowledge and the long-term impact for the programme and**

mentee. An impactful mentoring intervention is not just about the time in the programme but what happens beyond it."

Ensuring mentors are supported during their journey is also critical. The **Scottish Mentoring Network** reinforces the importance of training and continuous support:

"Being able to give your mentors good quality training and support, not just at the beginning, but throughout their journey as a mentor, is a really important aspect. If you do this well, you keep these mentors, they keep coming back, and they want to help other people. Then they become a really good ambassador for your organisation and a good case study."

Key aspects include:

- Having a strong recruitment strategy with diversified recruitment channels.
- Developing a mentoring journey that focuses on the mentor's experience.
- Providing ongoing support for mentors.
- Providing opportunities for mentors to connect and give feedback.
- Embedding recognition practices into the programme: certificates or closure events.

Outcomes: When mentoring programmes invest time in outlining the desired profile of mentors and developing appropriate recruitment strategies, they can anticipate faster engagement. Clearly defining expectations and realistic outcomes avoids deception and promotes retention.

Favourable context: Resources must be spent developing recruitment, recognition, user strategies and experience. Local context can also affect the availability and demographics of mentors, as there is a higher pool of mentors in urban areas. When working with high-risk young people, employing young people workers or full-time staff as mentors can be a beneficial option, as it allows for more dedicated time for specialised training and consistent follow-ups.

However, mentor retention can be impacted by factors such as funding and contract stability. A mentoring staff member explained during focus groups the challenges faced by voluntary sector organisations in retaining skilled mentors:

"We retain our mentors for about a year, but if our programmes are only funded for one to two years, it's difficult to recruit and retain people long-term with that type of funding."

In Practice: One Million Mentors strives to maintain a diverse pool of mentors, sourcing volunteers from various backgrounds and life

experiences, with the only requirement being a few years of working experience. They emphasise that they are not seeking a specific profile, and it is important to keep recruitment as broad as possible.

Mentor-peer support can also play a role in retention. During focus groups, one mentor suggested that having a buddy system could improve the experience for new mentors:

> **"It might be nice to have a buddy. It would help to speak with someone who has been mentoring on the programme for a while. They could share their experiences and how they handled particular situations. This would provide a personal perspective and take some of the pressure off the facilitator, who might otherwise have to answer all these questions."**

Additionally, mentors benefit from spaces to reflect and exchange ideas with others. Another mentor highlighted the value of open forums for sharing experiences across different regions:

> **"It's been really good to hear that other places, in different parts of the country have had different experiences. Before, I kind of thought, 'Are all schools like this?' so having an open forum rather than just a link sent out would be much more engaging."**

Mentoring is also rewarding for the mentors themselves. One mentor shared how the experience has been beneficial to their own personal and professional growth:

> **"When I signed up to be a mentor, I didn't expect that this would be something I would gain, and I absolutely am. It helps me in the work that I do as well."**

5 Foster Collaboration with Schools and Services

What the research tells us is that building strong partnerships with schools, services, and local organisations is essential to create holistic, supportive systems for mentees and stable and impactful mentoring programmes (Gowdy, 2024). Effective collaboration between mentoring organisations and schools can enhance programme outcomes, provide consistency, and help mentees feel supported across different aspects of their lives.

Inspiring Scotland suggests how school-based[17] and community-based[18] mentoring services could effectively complement one another, providing support where either faces limitations:

> **"It's easier usually for the school-based services to have consistency around a place to meet, an environment, and a time, if the young person is regularly engaged with education. But community-based services seem better served to support holistically when life outside school is challenging."**

Key aspects include:

- Identifying school partners with strong ties to the local community who are well-positioned to support mentoring initiatives.
- Assigning a dedicated staff member as the primary liaison for partner schools while ensuring a designated school representative oversees mentoring services. This individual should have a deep understanding of the programme. Ideally, they should hold a senior position within the school to facilitate decision-making and programme integration.
- Engaging school staff in various programme activities, such as events, workshops, and feedback sessions. Providing schools with a structured calendar outlining key milestones and moments requiring their active participation ensures better coordination, preparation, and meaningful contributions to the mentoring programme.

Outcomes: Strong partner relationships solidify the stability and reach of the programme within the school and the community can contribute positively to connecting caregivers and families to the school.

Favourable Context: Having pluriannual partnerships with schools and a limited amount of school partners. Prioritising maximising the numbers within one same school rather than having small amounts of young people in several schools. Having gained the trust of the community and having access to families or caregivers.

In practice: The Access Project's mentors are paid staff of the organisation. They are based at schools where they can foster relationships with school staff and liaise with them when necessary. Also, mentees can visit them at school freely (besides their mentoring sessions), which increases the effectiveness of the relationship. A team member from The Access Project describes the efficiency of working directly in schools while acknowledging the challenges:

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[17] Programmes that predominantly occur within the school, either as part of school, before or after school, but on school grounds.

[18] Programmes that predominantly take place in the community.

> **"We work in schools, our mentors are based in schools, they have a little office in school and sit there every day, which is really efficient. I feel like we're meeting young people where they're at, where they're going every day. "**

Schools can also have an impact on mentors' experiences. During focus groups, one mentor reflected on how a well-engaged school facilitator can contribute positively to mentoring outcomes:

> **"You can see the progression from week one to where we are now. We did really well to get the school that we are in because our teacher facilitator is brilliant, and she's really engaged as well. So that helps massively."**

However, some mentors encountered significant obstacles due to school disengagement. One mentor described the disappointment of seeing potential mentee progress hindered by a lack of school engagement:

> **"It was disappointing because there was some growth, but I don't think we could fully explore that because of how the school treated the session. We never met the school lead. She was never in any of the sessions. There was no way to rectify it. [...] They tried their best, but they couldn't."**

6 Engaging Legal Guardians and Communities

What the research tells us is that legal guardians and community involvement increase the effectiveness of mentoring programmes by building a holistic support system for mentees (Gowdy, 2024). It allows mentees to build strong relationships with adults and their community, increasing their access to additional resources and opportunities (DuBois et al., 2011). Importantly, this support system plays a crucial role in sustaining progress beyond the formal[19] mentoring relationship, ensuring that mentees receive guidance and encouragement even after the programme ends.

Inspiring Scotland highlights how mentoring often extends beyond a one-to-one[20] relationship to encompass broader family support:

[19] Formal mentoring indicates that the relationship between mentor and mentee is formalised and explicitly recognised. In most instances, this means that both mentor and mentee participate in a mentoring programme that expressly recognises the mentoring relationship and usually involves matching a selected young person (mentee) to another individual (mentor).

[20] Programmes in which one mentor is working with one young person and in which matching typically takes place.

> **"We do start out with a one-to-one mentoring relationship, but we're often getting pulled into family support work, wider young person support beyond mentoring."**

Key aspects include:

- Ensuring caregivers are informed of the programme's objectives and mentee's involvement.
- Informing caregivers of the mentee's progress.
- Connecting mentoring programmes to community resources and activities to increase mentees' sense of belonging, autonomy and networks.

Outcomes: Legal guardians and community engagement can increase programme retention as mentees are encouraged by their surroundings to engage in the programme. It can also increase mentee's relationships and networks, moving towards autonomy and preparing them for the end of their mentoring relationship.

Favourable context: Allocating dedicated time within the mentoring cycle to engage with legal guardians and share the mentee's progress with them. Conducting a thorough mapping of existing community young people services to identify how the mentoring programme complements and enhances the current support available for young people.

In practice: The Kids Network requires explicit consent from caregivers, encourages their engagement during the programme, and maintains regular touchpoints with them. Mentors are required to live within a 45-minute radius of the mentee to ensure they are connected to the local community.

Inspiring Scotland further emphasises the importance of family involvement in mentoring:

> **"We'll do a family visit before any matches are made up. The parent or carer is part of the mentoring environment because they've got to enable and facilitate meeting in the community and allowing their young person to go out and know that they're safe and know that they're with someone that they can trust for those few hours a week."**

7 Empower Mentees as Active Agents

What the research tells us: Mentoring should empower young people to take an active role in their mentoring experience, shaping their development and making decisions that impact their journey (Comfort, 2004).

The Kids Network stresses the importance of ensuring that young people actively agree to participate in the mentoring programme, highlighting the importance of setting expectations early through clear agreements with mentees:

> **"Sometimes children can be signed up to programmes without much say, especially for younger children. [...] So, starting from that agency [...] they have agreed, that this is a programme, and they understand it and they know what the boundaries are, is really important."**

Key aspects include:

- Mentees must voluntarily join mentoring programmes and understand the expectations and boundaries.
- Mentees can actively shape their development by identifying their needs, setting goals, participating in the mentor selection process, and choosing the format or location of meetings or activities they would like to do with their mentors.

Outcomes: Mentees are more engaged in the programmes and develop self-confidence and leadership skills.
Favourable context: Resources are available for young people, and the organisation makes active efforts to connect with young people and actively involve them in the programme.
In practice: Brightside places young people at the centre of their mentoring experience. Their Brightside programme allows mentees to choose their mentors from several presented options, and mentees can also decide whether to communicate with their mentors via text, video call, or both. The programme also emphasises a gradual transition towards mentee leadership:

> **"By the end of the programme, you want it to be purely mentee-led so they can go off to the next thing for them."**

Volunteer Matters reinforces the importance of giving mentees agency in shaping their mentoring experience:

> **"We do absolutely allow them to have agency in picking their mentors, stepping back if they feel like a match isn't working, and deciding what their goals are. Our goals are really diverse—it might be confidence, jobs, or even supporting them emotionally for a driving test. It's down to them, not the funders, not the local authority, not our impact tracker, but what makes them feel safe to pursue."**

The Diana Award Mentoring Programme takes this approach further by incorporating a strong focus on young people-led projects within their mentoring structure:

> **"From our twelve weeks, six of those sessions focus on a project that's based potentially within their community, where they would like to create change. And that extension project is really about them being able to bring that project to life through the support of their mentors."**

Additionally, mentoring organisations like **Brightside** engage young people through young people boards, ensuring that mentees have a platform to contribute to programme decisions and strategy. The **Scottish Mentoring Network** highlights the significance of this active role:

> **"We thought the importance of empowering mentees as active agents was very important—giving them the opportunity to be not just a mentee, but active in that role, understanding their position in the mentor-mentee relationship. They should be present, taking control of what they want to achieve, how long they want the relationship to last, and how they see it moving forward. "**

8 Adopt a Strength-Based Approach

What the research tells us is that highlighting mentees' strengths is crucial for building confidence and empowering them to see their potential (Piper and Piper, 2020). Moreover, effective mentoring programmes should focus on reciprocity, recognising that mentors and mentees bring valuable resources to the relationship (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

The **Scottish Mentoring Network** underscores the importance of engaging young people in programme design from the outset:

> **"One of the new services had like a young people council that they could use from the very early stages of designing the mentoring service. So they got to think about where they wanted it to be, if they wanted to be in the community, if they wanted to be in the schools, how often they wanted to meet their mentors, what types of mentors they thought they should be looking for. All that kind of stuff really came from young people."**

Key aspects include:

- Highlighting mentees' strengths, skills, and cultural wealth through activities and positive reinforcement.
- Promote reciprocity by encouraging mentors to share their experiences and challenges.

Outcomes: Mentees increase their self-confidence and autonomy and are better equipped for their future post-mentoring. Mentoring relationships are more stable and stronger, with mentees and mentors actively engaging in the programme. Additionally, mentees may gain the skills and experience needed to become mentors themselves in the future.
Favourable context: Strong communication with mentees, ensuring their needs and strengths are understood. The programme should include time for reflection and feedback with mentees. Additionally, mentors and mentees should have opportunities to contribute to programme improvements beyond their mentoring commitments.
In practice: Volunteer Matters places significant emphasis on organising young people forums and sending young people to events where they can actively participate and benefit. The organisation collects feedback from mentees to shape their programme, demonstrating that their perspectives and experiences are valued and impactful.

Similarly, the **Scottish Mentoring Network** has implemented flexible engagement strategies that allow mentees to transition between group and one-to-one mentoring at their own pace:

> **"They have a group service, where some of the mentors who currently don't have a match go and run, just hang out in the young people club and they do arts and crafts or whatever the kids want to do. And the young people who are referred to the service or come along to find out about the service, they have a choice. They can either go to the group sessions for a while so they get to know people, or they can go straight into a one-to-one mentoring relationship. And when they come out of their one-to-one mentoring relationship, they can choose to go back into the group sessions."**

Ensuring mentees are given autonomy in engagement also improves outcomes. One mentor shared their perspective on allowing mentees to participate at their own pace:

> **"I've noticed—that sometimes people are less engaged if they feel that they're being almost forced into speaking or there's a big expectation that they should. [...] for some people that perhaps just pushes them to engage even less. Whereas if you allow them to take the step back for the time that they need to and feel that they can contribute when they're ready, I think that makes them feel more comfortable."**

Lifeline also highlights the importance of viewing mentees as future leaders and giving them the tools to become one through mentoring. It is important for mentoring programmes to develop mentee's autonomy and prepare them for their next steps:

" Develop them as a leader, don't create dependence."

9 Expanding Mentoring Models

What the research tells us is that programmes that expand beyond the traditional one-on-one mentoring model encourage young people to build networks of supportive adults (Schwartz and Rhodes, 2016) and empower them to see themselves as agents of social change (Albright, Hurd and Hussain, 2017).

Scottish Mentoring Network highlights the importance of integrating young people into broader support networks:

> **"Being able to integrate young people into other services so that we are knitting them into a broader community. Not just a dependency on our particular organisation but helping them develop their own community."**

Some key aspects include:

- Embedding networks of peers and mentors in the mentoring programme.
- Complementing mentoring programme by including community activities, skill workshops and events.

Outcomes: Expanding mentoring models can increase mentee's social connectedness, leadership skills, and community involvement.

Favourable context: Mentoring staff collaborate closely with the local community and have a solid network of engaged mentors or alumni and funds for additional activities.

In Practice: The Diana Award Mentoring Programme is built around group mentoring[21] with a network of mentors supporting each group. This diverse model allows mentees to connect with mentors from various backgrounds. They also offer mentees the opportunity to participate in a social action project where they are encouraged to collaborate on community projects and develop their leadership skills. Their aim through the project is to go beyond the traditional goal of mentoring, bettering educational outcomes and developing an active and involved young people.

Inspiring Scotland highlights the importance of maintaining long-term connections between mentoring programmes and young people:

> **"Over the last eight years, we have discovered that particularly during COVID, a lot of young people came back to our local charities.**

[21] Programmes in which a group of mentors works with a group of young people, in which multiple mentors work with a single young person, or multiple young people work with one mentor. These can be school- or community-based.

Keeping the door open [...] with the coordinator who forms a really important triangle between a young person, the volunteer, and the coordinator. Young people can come back if they hit bumps in the road. They can find that trust and get that informal support they need."

Similarly**, City Year UK** underscores the importance of partnership and collaboration with existing support services:

"The importance of knowing what other services and who else is kind of around you and within the structures that you're carrying out these mentoring interventions in order to help and kind of inform that process. Mentoring is part of that process. And being a mentor is part of that support package, not the only thing."

10 Early Prevention and Geographically Tailored Support

What the research tells us is that mentoring is beneficial for early intervention targeting young people, but it is not a standalone solution for complex challenges (Dubois et al., 2011). Keller (2018) also emphasises that tailoring programmes to geographical and cultural nuance improves their effectiveness by increasing their relevance and accessibility to mentees.

Volunteer Matters highlights the challenge of geographical accessibility for mentoring programmes:

"There is a mentoring programme for every young person. There's such diversity in types of mentoring programmes, but it's whether or not they're available in that particular young person's area. I think London is saturated. Trying to get into the rural areas is so difficult. The funding isn't there."

Key aspects include:

- Recognising the limits of a mentoring intervention.
- Identifying when additional resources, such as mental health services or educational support, are needed and providing referrals accordingly.
- Being aware and adapting the programme to the local context.

Outcomes: Focusing on early prevention and adapting to the local context ensures that resources are used efficiently whilst increasing the programme's effectiveness.
Favourable context: A well-established referral system and awareness of additional local resources are essential. Conducting a thorough mapping of the area helps identify where the mentoring programme fits best, ensuring it complements rather than duplicates existing services.
In practice: The **YMCA Scotland** programme focuses on early prevention and has a strong referral system that ensures enrolled mentees can get the most out of the programme. Moreover, whilst their programme lasts 12 months and has a clear structure, they are also embedded in their local community. They consider the local context and needs by remaining flexible on specific goals, content of sessions or local activities.

Scottish Mentoring Network emphasises the importance of adapting services and ensuring young people can be referred to the right programmes:

> **"If there is like a specific intervention that uses mentoring, but it's an age range or geographical area or a purpose, and they've got a young person that doesn't fit that, to enable them to pass them on or find other, is a good quality standard and it's kind of want to look after."**

The Access Project operates in schools across various regions. Initially, they implemented a consistent mentoring programme across all schools to streamline evaluation. However, they soon realised this approach was not as effective, as schools differ significantly in their challenges and resources. Some serve under-resourced communities, while others have more after-school activities, staff capacity, and a more supportive mentoring attitude. In response, they adopted a place-based approach, tailoring their programme to each school's specific needs and context.

11 Trauma-Informed Practices

What the research tells us is that trauma-informed practices create a safe environment for young people who may have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Young people at risk of becoming NEET are more likely to have experienced ACEs (Crowley et al 2024). Mentors trained in trauma-sensitive practices are better equipped to support their needs effectively (Rhodes 2009).

However, recognising the limits of mentoring is equally important. While mentors play a crucial role, they are not a substitute for professional

support in complex cases. **LifeLine Projects** highlights the increasing complexity of mentees' needs, emphasising the growing demand for mentor skills and the risk of mentors being placed in roles beyond their capacity:

> **"We're finding that the young people that we're mentoring are becoming more and more complex which then is driving up the level of support and skill level that our mentors need. And we're dealing with things that we shouldn't really be dealing with. But there's no other place for these young people to go. So it's falling out in our mentoring sessions."**

This underscores the importance of early prevention, geographically tailored support, and **partnerships with professional services** to ensure that young people receive the right level of support when mentoring alone is insufficient.

Key aspects include:

- Creating a safe and supportive environment for mentees.
- Implementing trauma-informed approaches by building trust, establishing clear boundaries, and offering consistency and predictability in the mentoring relationship.
- Providing training and support to mentors on trauma-informed practices.

Outcomes: Increased emotional stability, improved trust between mentors and mentees, and better academic and behavioural outcomes.
Favourable context: Trauma-informed practices are especially relevant for mentoring programmes supporting mentees from high-stress or underserved environments, though not all youth mentoring initiatives require this focus. A strong understanding of mentees' backgrounds, along with connections to their caregivers or support networks, enhances the effectiveness of trauma-sensitive approaches. Implementing these practices can be challenging for volunteer mentors, making it essential to provide specialised training or, where possible, allocate resources to professional mentors who can offer structured trauma-informed support.
In practice: Lifeline works with at-risk young people of violence or mental health. Lifeline mentoring incorporates trauma-informed training for their paid young people workers, mentors and volunteers, emphasising trust-building, consistency, and empathy. Mentors are able to recognise the signs of trauma and adapt their approaches to create a supportive environment for mentees.

12 Include a Social Justice and Equity Lens

What the research tells us is that mentoring programmes should integrate social justice approaches into their curricula and mentor training to ensure they do not unintentionally perpetuate inequalities (Albright, Hurd & Hussain, 2017). By fostering awareness and understanding of systemic barriers, mentoring can become a tool for empowerment and social change, equipping both mentors and mentees with the knowledge and skills to engage in civic and democratic participation. Additionally, reducing disparities in social capital[22] is crucial. Unequal access to networks can reinforce existing inequalities, limiting opportunities for young people (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Mentoring can serve as a vehicle for change, broadening access to professional and social connections that might otherwise remain out of reach.

Key aspects include:

- Embedding cultural awareness, racial equity, and social justice into the mentoring programme, such as through training for mentees and mentors, workshops, events and flexibility of goals.
- Promoting access to networks and opportunities to bridge gaps in social capital.
- Diversifying mentor pool to ensure relatability, representation, and varied perspectives.

Outcomes: The programme can create a more inclusive environment for young people whilst having a larger impact on society.

Favourable context: The programme has developed a clear theory of change and recognises the existing inequalities affecting its young people participants, ensuring its interventions contribute to reducing them. Staff members raise awareness of these issues among mentors, integrating this perspective into recruitment and communication strategies. Additionally, stakeholders can track and assess the programme's social impact, reinforcing its long-term effectiveness and commitment to equity.

In Practice: The Girl's Network organises a school-based opening event where all mentees meet all mentors involved in the programme in a speed-matching[23] event, which allows mentees to talk to a wide array of mentors from different backgrounds and professions. Also, once they have finished the programme, mentors have access to the alumni network of all mentees who have participated, increasing their professional network.

Mentors from **The Diana Award Mentoring Programme** highlight the personal growth and self-reflection that come with engaging in mentoring through a social justice lens. One mentor shared their experience of

[22] Refers to the networks, relationships, and social connections that provide individuals access to resources, opportunities, and support.

[23] The process of pairing up a mentor with a mentee.

learning from their mentee and developing a greater awareness of personal biases:

> **"I think it's given me some insights and some fresh perspectives. So working with young people in this context, is just recognising the young people, some of the experiences, and it's quite humbling understanding some of the backgrounds and the challenges that young people face."**

Another mentor reflected on how the mentoring experience led them to examine their own perspectives and assumptions:

> **"It challenges me and tests me sometimes, and I have some time after the session to reflect on, you know, how did I behave, how did I respond, what did I think about that? And, you know, thinking about, have I maybe had some prejudices, perhaps that I wasn't necessarily aware of? I didn't think that I did. But maybe some of those things are teaching me that I've got a certain way of looking at some aspects. And that's really good because it's helping me consider those and reflect on how I think and how I interact with young people."**

These twelve best practices have consistently emerged from research and practice in the UK, demonstrating their value in **delivering quality mentoring services for young people.** By integrating research findings, practitioner insights, and real-world examples, they highlight the importance of **structured relationships, flexibility, collaboration, and inclusivity.**

Each best practice serves a distinct role in shaping effective mentoring services. While some of these practices may depend on available funding, many can be incorporated within existing **mentoring work by adopting a new perspective and refining current approaches.** Implementing some of these practices **gradually,** rather than all at once, is key, as they are **interconnected**—for example, stronger partnerships with schools can enhance mentors' experiences, which in turn supports mentor retention. Over time, a more stable and engaged mentor pool can foster greater awareness of social justice perspectives, and experienced mentors will feel more confident in applying trauma-informed practices. Raising awareness of these best practices allows organisations to improve their impact and enhance mentoring experiences for mentees, mentors, staff, and partners.

Ultimately, mentoring thrives when it is **intentional, well-supported, and embedded within a strong ecosystem.** By integrating these best practices alongside their existing efforts, mentoring programmes can **create meaningful, lasting relationships, empower young people, bridge**

opportunity gaps, and contribute to a more inclusive and supportive society.

5. How Can We Do Better? The Future of Youth Mentoring in the UK

The UK mentoring sector is **built on strong, well-structured programmes** designed to meet the diverse needs of young people. While the best practices outlined above provide a strong foundation, **there is still room for further development and innovation** in the field.

While many mentoring services already incorporate some of these best practices, **broader implementation across all youth mentoring programmes would strengthen the entire sector.** Through our analysis of the strengths and challenges in the field[24], we have developed several recommendations to address key areas for improvement. These insights not only highlight promising future directions for mentoring but also identify critical areas for growth that can help mentoring services evolve, expand their impact, and create lasting benefits for young people across the UK.

Strengthen Collaboration and Advocacy

As a community dedicated to meeting the needs of young people, fostering strong partnerships among professionals in the field leads to better advocacy for mentoring. A common objective and unified voice are crucial for supporting the interests of the UK mentoring community and those they serve. Joint representation recommendations include:

- **Promote National Collaboration**

Drawing inspiration from European countries such as France, Spain, and Germany, there would be value in establishing a national structure (i.e. umbrella organisation) that connects mentoring programmes across the UK, defends the field's needs and ensures quality-driven services. This organisation would support knowledge exchange, ensure quality standards, showcase the impact of mentoring, and provide a unified voice for mentoring professionals, mentees and mentors. The **Scottish Mentoring Network** serves is an example of this structure. They highlight the role of networks in strengthening mentoring efforts across Scotland:

> **"We can kind of signpost people here and there. We did a little piece of work last year around mapping the young people services. Most of our young people's services have care-experienced young people**

[24] See chapter 3, section 8.1 for more information

involved in them."

However, given the geographical size and diversity of England, a more decentralised approach could be recommended, where regional coordination ensures localised representation and effectiveness.

> **"Scotland's different. Like, it's small. We do have our issues around rurality and the central belt versus North and South but compared to England and Wales as a bigger mass, I think it's easier for us. There's probably no mentoring service in Scotland that we've not heard of. So you've got that ability to kind of pass people on or pull people together to work towards something or advocate for something."**

- **Increase Advocacy and Awareness:**

A well-defined advocacy strategy and a credible message encourage dialogue with stakeholders whilst helping potential mentoring partners comprehend the field. Engaging in advocacy efforts as a group is crucial to rallying public and private support for mentoring programmes.

A practitioner from **Volunteer Matters** stressed the importance of moving beyond individual programmes to advocate as a unified sector:

> **"If we collectively had opportunities across organisations, then actually your 10 that you get to your organisation with a 10 from another would then start to build a much bigger voice. We also need to get out of the mindset of how our programme serves young people and think about how we collectively serve as a sector. Some of the challenges, like mentor retention, could be better tackled collectively."**

- **Engage in National Campaigns for Mentor Recruitment**

Launch coordinated national campaigns to address the widespread challenge of mentor recruitment faced by programmes across the UK. By raising awareness of the benefits of mentoring for both mentors and mentees, such campaigns can attract diverse volunteers and foster a culture of active participation in mentoring initiatives.

By improving mentor referral mechanisms and expanding recruitment, mentoring programmes can operate more efficiently, ensuring that every young person who needs a mentor is matched in a timely manner.

- **Build Connected Services Within the Community**

Mentoring is most effective when it integrates young people into a broader network of community services. The **Scottish Mentoring Network** underlines the importance of embedding mentoring within a wider support system:

"Being able to then integrate young people into other services so that we are knitting them into a broader community. Not just a dependency on our particular organisation but helping them develop their own community."

By fostering stronger collaborations between mentoring programmes and other young people services, organisations can ensure that mentees receive ongoing support even after their formal mentoring relationships end. Demonstrating long-term impact through data collection and follow-ups will also strengthen advocacy efforts, helping to secure funding and enhance the sustainability of mentoring initiatives. If this work is carried out collectively or supported by a national structure, organisations can focus more on direct support for young people, trusting that a central body is advocating for their interests and strengthening the sector.

Enhance Evaluation Practices

During the interviews for this report, evaluation consistently emerged as one of the most challenging aspects of mentoring programmes. This challenge stems from the resource-intensive nature of evaluations and the limited resources available to mentoring organisations. Mentoring providers25 frequently find evaluation to be a particularly demanding component, and demonstrating the impact of mentoring programmes is just as crucial as having mentors. Therefore, the recommendations follow:

- **Simplify Evaluation Mechanisms:**

Develop user-friendly evaluation tools organisations can use to gather feedback and assess impact efficiently. This could include digital platforms for tracking mentee progress and mentor feedback if financial support is provided.

- **Engage in Longitudinal Cohort Studies:**

Encourage the implementation of long-term evaluations to track mentees' outcomes over several years, offering evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of mentoring interventions. National government funding could be pursued as part of a public policy evaluation involving various mentoring organisations nationwide.

- **Collaborative Evaluation Efforts:**

[25] The organisation, institution or team that provides the mentoring programme.

Promote partnerships amongst mentoring organisations to pool resources for national-level evaluations, enabling shared learning and consistent quality benchmarks.

The **Scottish Mentoring Network** highlights the importance of long-term tracking to assess mentoring effectiveness:

> **"Young people might come back five or 10 years after we've mentored them. We want to be able to track impact. But we need that long-term structure for that. So, measuring impact is really important. But tracking that long-term impact could only happen if we've got stability. "**

To address this, some mentoring programmes have started building alumni networks that keep former mentees engaged and connected with their mentors and programmes. This not only facilitates impact tracking but also allows mentees to give back as mentors or contributors to future cohorts. Strengthening these networks would ensure long-term evaluation mechanisms while fostering a culture of continued engagement and mutual support.

Invest in Workforce Development

As the mentoring sector grows, new mentoring services emerge whilst existing ones solidify their foundations. Mentoring programmes must support a broader range of young people, be well-structured and equip their teams for specific mentoring processes. More and more paid positions are being advertised, making 'organising mentoring' an increasingly common occupation in the social service industry. As a result, mentoring practitioners are evolving into professionals whose expertise is essential for the rapid success of a mentoring programme. Therefore, recognising and valuing this profession is vital for mentoring programmes to thrive and provide quality mentoring interventions to those they serve.

- **Training and Support for Practitioners**

Provide comprehensive training for mentoring coordinators and practitioners, focusing on essential skills such as cultural competency, trauma-informed practices, and effective relationship-building.

The **Scottish Mentoring Network** underscores the need for career development pathways within the sector to retain and upskill professionals:

> **"We'd love to be able to offer career progression for staff. We think that would help retention and that would help the mentoring sector, as it were, to upskill rather than keep losing our staff to secure work. To retain them and retain that skill set would be key. I think with longer-term funding; we can create a funnel for young people from beneficiary to ambassador to volunteer to sessional and to staff. And actually seeing those young people that want to take up a**

> **career into the work that we've modelled is really rewarding. And whether they contribute back as volunteers or staff, it takes time."**

- **Acknowledge the Role of a "Mentoring Coordinator":**

As mentoring expands, the demand for additional mentoring services necessitates the recruitment of more mentoring coordinators. This highlights the need to attract highly trained professionals with expertise and to retain talent to prevent team turnover. The **Scottish Mentoring Network** further emphasises the importance of standardising the role of mentoring coordinators across young people services:

> **"That's a lot of the work we do with young people services, trying to get them out so they're all on the same level of what makes a good coordinator, what you need to think about, how you need to support your mentors, what you need to put into your training. If there is a common understanding and agreement, then the transfer of volunteers, staff, and young people makes it a more stable sector [...] quite a lot of transference of staff and volunteers, and even young people who have come up through a mentoring service and now run one."**

- **Enhance Soft Skill Assessment and Recognition:**

Develop systems to assess and formally recognise the soft skills[26] gained through any mentoring experience. Highlighting the transferable value of these skills can incentivise corporations to engage their employees in mentoring activities whilst motivating citizens to become mentors by showcasing the personal and professional growth opportunities mentoring provides.

Football Beyond Borders highlights the need for increased awareness of the key skills required to be a mentor, ensuring that mentoring is not seen as a casual role but a meaningful intervention:

> **"I don't necessarily mean accreditation in terms of professionalisation, but more about increasing awareness of the skills that a good mentor should have."**

Incorporate Technology and Innovation

As the demand for mentoring grows, programmes should explore innovative strategies to reduce less critical tasks and concentrate on essential supervisory areas for mentoring pairs. By balancing human involvement with technology integration whilst prioritising the fundamental aspects of quality mentoring, programmes can improve tracking and

[26] Interpersonal and transferable skills such as communication, leadership, empathy, and adaptability, which are critical for job readiness and career success.

support of mentoring activities and effectively reach remote regions where young people services are currently limited.

- **Expanding Digital Mentoring**

Technology can facilitate online or hybrid mentoring models, enabling programmes to reach mentees in remote or underserved areas who may not have access to in-person support.

- **Data-Driven Approaches**

AI and digital tools can enhance mentor training, improve mentor-mentee matching, and provide real-time check-ins to track progress. Automated insights can help mentoring coordinators identify areas where additional support is needed while streamlining programme evaluation. These innovations do not replace human relationships but complement them by offering personalised guidance, increasing efficiency, and strengthening the long-term impact of mentoring.

By leveraging AI and technology thoughtfully, mentoring programmes can scale their impact, maintain high-quality interactions, and ensure that mentoring remains accessible and effective for all young people.

Elevate Young people Voice and Participation

The voices of young people have often been underrepresented in programme design and implementation. Although the UK field values the importance of young people perspectives, enhancing further mentoring to become genuinely young people-centred[27] is crucial. Actively involving mentees guarantees that their needs, aspirations, and feedback influence the programmes to support them. By empowering young individuals as active agents, we can amplify the effectiveness of mentoring and cultivate skills that prepare mentees for the future. Hence, the suggestions include:

- **Young people-Centred Programme Design**

Actively engage young people in designing, implementing, and evaluating mentoring programmes. This could include young people participation on boards, co-design workshops, and participatory action research. Include young people on advisory boards to ensure their perspectives are heard and valued, as pointed out by a mentoring coordinator during focus groups:

> **"Their [mentee] engagement, their contribution, their co-production, is seen as being really quite significant—the mentee voice can influence what the programmes are like. "**

- **Empowering Young people as Active Agents:**

[27] A method that prioritises the needs, voices, and aspirations of young people in the design, implementation, and evaluation of mentoring programmes

Encourage mentees to take leadership roles within programmes, fostering agency and developing their skills as future leaders and mentors. A "virtuous cycle" of engagement can emerge when mentees transition into leadership roles within mentoring organisations, as described in the following mentoring programme testimony:

> **"We've had care-experienced young people who've been mentored, gone on to become volunteers, then progressed to paid coordinator roles within our programme. They are now out there raising money, shaping the programme, and ensuring it continues to develop. This long-term impact doesn't happen on its own—it requires support, training, and investment. But it is possible. Over the years, we've had several coordinators who started as volunteers and later became paid staff members. Some have even pursued further training and become social workers. So, there is a huge training pathway here that could be much better utilised if there was a long-term view."**

By embedding young people participation at the core of mentoring initiatives, organisations can ensure that young people are not just beneficiaries but active contributors to shaping the mentoring landscape. Expanding opportunities for mentees to take on leadership roles, transition into professional pathways, and remain engaged beyond their mentoring period will create a more sustainable and impactful sector.

Embed Equity and Social Justice

Embedding equity and social justice within mentoring programmes ensures they address systemic barriers and promote inclusivity. By fostering critical consciousness in mentors and mentees, these programmes can challenge inequality and create meaningful opportunities for all participants. Inclusive recruitment and training practices can make mentoring programmes more reflective of the diverse experiences of their mentees and build a stronger connection between mentors and the young people they serve. Therefore, the recommendations include:

- **Diverse and Inclusive Mentor Recruitment**

Develop proactive strategies to recruit mentors from various backgrounds, ensuring mentees see themselves reflected in their mentors' experiences. To achieve this, mentoring programmes should adopt proactive strategies that intentionally diversify their mentor pool. Partnering with local community organisations or cultural institutions can help recruit mentors from underrepresented backgrounds, leveraging existing trusted relationships within diverse communities.

Targeted recruitment campaigns can also play a crucial role in engaging a broader range of mentors. Developing materials that highlight diverse mentor experiences and the value of lived experience can encourage

participation. Using culturally relevant messaging that resonates with different communities and sharing success stories of mentors from varied backgrounds can further inspire engagement.

- **Equity-Driven Approaches**

Offering training on cultural awareness, social justice, and inclusive mentoring practices helps mentors build stronger relationships with mentees and fosters a more inclusive and equitable mentoring environment. By prioritising diversity and inclusivity, mentoring programmes can create diverse support networks for young people.

The UK mentoring field holds significant **potential to become a widely recognised sector worldwide**. By empowering young people to take the lead and consistently embedding mentoring practices within communities and schools, **the sector can continue to grow and flourish**. To drive ongoing improvement, it will be beneficial for the field to organise and collaborate, open sustained dialogues across organisations, and consider a unified approach to tackle national challenges such as mentor recruitment, sustainable funding, and effective evaluation.

Creating a formal network to enhance the collective impact of mentoring programmes will be **crucial for tackling these issues together**. Promoting mentoring as a recognised pathway for soft skill development, career growth, and social mobility can also attract more mentors, inspire corporate engagement, and ensure the sector's long-term sustainability. Together, these actions will enable the UK mentoring sector to provide structured mentoring experiences across the country, enhance support for young people, promote inclusion, and cultivate a culture of opportunity and growth.

CHAPTER 3: HOW DID WE GET HERE? UNDERSTANDING THE YOUTH MENTORING LANDSCAPE IN THE UK

6. The Evolution of Mentoring: An Adaptive Methodology Addressing Young people Social Challenges

6.1 From its American Roots to Tailored UK Practices

The earliest account of formalised youth mentoring can be traced back to the United States with the mentoring organisation Big Brothers Big

Sisters[28], established in 1904 by Ernest Coulter in New York. In response to a high rate of young people delinquency, particularly among boys, he devised **a mentoring programme that connected adults with at-risk young people to help reduce delinquency** (Philip, 2003). Other organisations, such as the YMCA and the Scouts, adopted a structured model which employed a strong paternalistic approach to instilling values and fostering character. Mentoring took its **traditional approach of a one-on-one intervention** between an experienced adult and a younger individual viewed as "at risk", intending to guide the young person towards becoming a productive member of society (Philip, 2003).

Since then, mentoring interventions have **multiplied amongst young people-oriented services in the United States.** Over the last 25 years, these interventions have evolved from intensive community-based approaches to a diverse array of programmes involving around 2.5 million American volunteers yearly (Raposa, Dietz, & Rhodes, 2017). In the 1980s, bipartisan support, strong advocacy, and generous funding facilitated the expansion of these programmes, which aim to promote well-being and prevent adverse outcomes in vulnerable young people. Whilst the United States still leads in numbers, youth mentoring initiatives have also gained traction globally, particularly in countries like Israel, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand (Colley, 2003; Miller, 2002).

Compared to the US, the concept of mentoring took hold more gradually in the UK, initially emerging through organisations that had a presence in both the UK and the US, such as the YMCA[29], Scouts[30], and other Christian organisations, from the 1950s to 1970s. While these organisations provided guidance and support to young people, their approach often differed from the traditional one-on-one mentoring model, incorporating elements of group mentoring, coaching, and community engagement. From its inception, **mentoring in the UK has evolved in response to local needs, distinguishing itself from its American counterpart** by adapting programmes to fit the country's specific social, educational, and policy landscape.

In 1983, the King's Trust[31] established some of the first formal mentoring programmes to support young people in response to the urban riots of the 1980s. The Young people Business Trust, now known as Enterprise, aimed to assist young individuals aged 16 to 30 who were unemployed, disabled, or from ethnic minority backgrounds in launching their businesses by

[28] For more information on Big Brother Big Sisters of America: https://www.bbbs.org/about-us/
[29] To learn more about YMCA UK: https://ymca.org.uk/about-us/
[30] To learn more about Scouts UK: https://www.scouts.org.uk/
[31] To learn more about the King's Trust: https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us

providing grants and loans to aspiring entrepreneurs. A vital aspect of this programme was the mentorship provided to participants, where seasoned business professionals offered guidance, support, and practical advice to assist young people in navigating the challenges of starting and managing a business. With the development of the term "disaffected young people[32]" in the 90s, public policies aimed at getting young people from low-income backgrounds into work. Since then, mentoring in the UK has increasingly been **focused on young people employment** (Piper and Piper, 2000).

In the 2000s, the government under Tony Blair prioritised tackling social exclusion through significant investments in young people initiatives (Philip, 2003). These programmes formed part of a **broader strategy to foster a more inclusive society and empower young people**, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. Shifting from its traditional focus on young people employment, mentoring emerged as a valuable **tool for supporting young individuals during their transition to adulthood.** It became a key component of Blair's strategy (Philip and Spratt, 2007). A significant milestone in this effort was the establishment of the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation (MBF) (The Guardian, 2003). Launched to formalise and standardise mentoring practices, the foundation was pivotal in promoting mentoring and befriending. However, changes in government led to a decline in support for mentoring and a decrease in funding for MBF, which closed in 2015 with its core services transferred to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) (Nadeem, 2015). This situation illustrates the **volatile and delicate nature of mentoring programmes,** whose existence relies on the funds and partnerships they manage to secure and maintain.

In the past decade, mentoring has gained renewed attention due to initiatives such as the London Mayor's New Deal for Young People[33]. Launched to address young people unemployment and educational inequalities, the programme focuses on **providing targeted mentoring support to young individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds** or facing barriers to employment. It aims to ensure 100,000 young Londoners access high-quality mentoring. In parallel, many **mentoring organisations have emerged with diverse practices and goals.** These organisations focus on mentoring as a tool for social mobility and personal development, including well-being and mental health.

[32] Defined as those who feel disconnected from mainstream society, characterised by disengagement from education, social isolation, and involvement in risky behaviours.
[33] To learn more about the New Deal for Young People: https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-mayor-does/priorities-london/londons-recovery-coronavirus-crisis/london-partnership-board/recovery-context/new-deal-young-people

6.2 Defining Youth Mentoring: Evolving Concepts Shaped by Local Realities

More Than Meets the Eye: Diverse Approaches to Quality Youth Mentoring

At first glance, mentoring may appear to follow a single, universal methodology, but there are many ways to achieve quality mentoring. The approach taken varies depending on cultural, institutional, and societal factors, leading to a wide diversity of effective mentoring models worldwide.

In the United States, the definitions of youth mentoring have been largely shaped by extensive academic research, which historically provides a structured, **evidence-based understanding of mentoring practices.** These definitions tend to focus on **structured, one-on-one, long-term relationships**. Leading scholars in the US, where many mentoring schemes originate, have described personal relationships as the defining element. Keller & Pryce (2010) highlight that mentees are often depicted as 'younger' persons, protégés, or people in need or at risk, while mentors are characterised as 'older and wiser' individuals who hold more power or resources by virtue of their age, experience, or position. This applies across different models, whether mentoring is framed as a non-specific, intergenerational 'friendship' model or a needs-based, problem-focused approach. Furthermore, Rhodes and DuBois (2008) stress that "beneficial effects are expected only to the extent that the mentor and young people forge a strong connection that is characterised by mutuality, trust, and empathy".

On the other side of the Atlantic, mentoring definitions have mostly been **shaped by practice.** In Europe, mentoring programmes have taken root in more diverse contexts **and evolved in response to pressing social needs, such as young people unemployment, educational inequality, and social integration.** Many of these programmes arise against the background of systemic inequalities suffered by the target groups. These social inequalities are rooted in and shaped by the ideological, economic, political, social and cultural structures of our societies. (Raithelhuber, 2023). Sometimes, mentoring for social inclusion is free-standing, and it provides the only remedy for a problem, such as when other forms of support are not made available to the target group or fail to meet their needs, as is often the case with refugees (Raithelhuber, 2023).

National mentoring landscapes evolve in response to their societies' needs and most urgent matters, mainly where public policies fall short. For example, during the recent migrant crisis, Spain and Germany saw mentoring initiatives emerge to support the integration of newcomers or as previously mentioned, the New Deal for Young People launched by the London Mayor to tackle young people unemployment. Mentoring to address

matters of social inclusion is being placed on the public agenda and becoming part of welfare policies (Raithelhuber, 2023).

Consequently, European mentoring definitions have been **influenced by policy-making and real-world application.** They can be diverse, encompassing structured and alternative approaches alongside more traditional models.

This divergence in how mentoring is defined has led to a **wide range of accepted and commonly used definitions worldwide.** The table below displays several of these definitions, illustrating how different national contexts influence their interpretation and application.

WHO	SECTOR	DEFINITION	COUNTRY
National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2014)	Umbrella Organisation	A voluntary, mutually beneficial and purposeful relationship in which an individual gives time to support another to enable them to make changes in their life.	UK
Heide Bussel, Rona Campbell, Ruth Kipping (2018)	Academia	Any programme between an identified young person and other individual(s) aimed at supporting the young person.	UK
CMS (2025)	Umbrella organisation	A social intervention methodology that promotes the relationship between individuals who voluntarily offer themselves (mentors) to provide support to others who are at risk of exclusion (mentees). For this relationship to be fruitful, a technical person accompanies, supports, supervises, and evaluates the process.	Spain
DuBois et al. (2011)	Academia	Helping relationship between a young person (mentee) and an older, more experienced individual (mentor) who provides developmental support and guidance to the young people.	USA

As part of our research, we presented various mentoring definitions to field experts. Some definitions resonated, while others were perceived as incomplete, inaccurate, or too narrow in scope. The critiques and reflections gathered from professionals in the field provided critical insights into what elements should be considered when defining mentoring. Below are key takeaways from these discussions:

Mentoring is not a one-way street: One critique was that some definitions framed mentoring as a unidirectional relationship, focusing only on the mentor's role in guiding and supporting the mentee. However, practitioners strongly emphasised the reciprocal nature of mentoring:

> **"Every single one of my volunteers will say they've learned and developed from their relationship with their mentee. It's not a one-way street."**

Beyond transactional relationships: Some definitions used terminology that suggested mentoring was purely about assistance or helping, which led to concerns about misrepresenting the essence of mentoring:

> **"Using the word "helping" in the definition makes [mentoring] sound transactional. The sentiment of development, support, and guidance is fine, but using 'helping' sound like a simple service rather than an empowering relationship."**

The importance of structure and expertise: Some experts stressed that mentoring should be recognised as a structured intervention requiring specific expertise to avoid it being perceived as a "soft option":

> **"[Mentoring] is seen as a soft option or something that's just really easy to do. Like a school might decide one day, 'We're going to do some peer mentoring34,' but there's maybe not as much thought put into it as if they were going to get a coach in to talk to students."**

Voluntary participation is not always straightforward: The voluntary nature of mentoring was another point of debate. While voluntary engagement is often seen as a core principle, some experts pointed out that in professional or structured settings, mentors may be paid, which alters the dynamics:

> **"The relationship between mentor and mentee is always supposed to be based on mutual willingness, but when it's your job, there's a different power dynamic."**

Unifying practices: Suggesting a common definition for the UK mentoring field

Taking the previous perspectives into account and understanding that mentoring definitions **"may not be capturing everything that a mentoring experience could have",** as noted by one mentoring professional during

[34] Programmes in which older students mentor younger students. These are typically students within the same school and the mentoring programme takes place within the school setting. Often, these are internally run schemes by the school monitored by an allocated staff member.

focus groups, **we propose a more nuanced definition** that seizes the complexity, purpose, and structure of mentoring in the UK while maintaining flexibility to accommodate different mentoring models:

Mentoring is a structured yet flexible relationship in which a trusted individual (mentor) provides support, guidance, and encouragement to another (mentee). This non-judgmental, reciprocal engagement between a mentor and a mentee is mutually beneficial and designed to empower mentees to set and achieve their own goals while developing their skills and autonomy.

Mentoring relationships take place within a structured programme that can vary in format, setting, and duration. Each mentoring relationship is supported by a professional staff member who oversees and supervises the process, ensuring its effectiveness and alignment with the mentee's needs.

By adopting this definition, we acknowledge that mentoring takes various forms depending on cultural, social, and institutional contexts. This approach ensures that mentoring is neither seen as a simplistic or transactional intervention nor an exclusive, rigid framework, but rather a meaningful and adaptable practice that serves **both mentors and mentees in dynamic ways.**

Navigating Youth Mentoring as Means to an End: A Functional Perspective

Mentoring relationships serve different purposes, either as an **end in themselves**—where the connection and support are the primary goals—or as a **means to a targeted outcome**, such as academic achievement or career progression (Cavell et al., 2021). Given that **goal-setting** is a key feature of mentoring relationships, it is crucial for organisations to be intentional about their desired outcomes and how their interventions align with mentees' needs[35].

A study in Ireland (Brady et al. 2017) supports this idea, stating that "emotional, advice and esteem support are more likely to emerge as the relationship becomes close and more akin to a 'naturally occurring relationship' than a 'formal intervention.'" This perspective suggests that while many mentoring programmes start as structured interventions, they may naturally evolve into enduring personal relationships that extend beyond their initial goals.

[35] For a detailed breakdown of Cavell et al.'s functional typology of mentoring, refer to graphic in **Annex 4**.

This dual perspective is echoed by practitioners in the field, many of whom emphasise goal-setting as an essential component of mentoring, even when relationships evolve into something more enduring:

> **"I've got a young person who stopped mentoring a few years ago, but still goes to their mentor's house for Christmas dinner. But they're befriending. They're not mentoring anymore because they're not doing that goal-setting."**

Some organisations also see mentoring as a tool for achieving institutional objectives, which raises questions about maintaining mentee-centred outcomes:

> **"For some partners, the end goal is for those students attending the university at the end of the programme. So, that's not really a mentoring goal. That's quite a transactional goal."**

Others stress the importance of **co-defined goals,** which prevent mentoring from becoming purely transactional:

> **"Whether it's a very big goal or a small goal, there's an agreed sense of purpose between the two individuals. I quite like that because it takes away any sense that it might be a transactional relationship."**

While both perspectives exist in practice, UK mentoring programmes increasingly focus on mentoring as a means to an end, aligning with broader young people development strategies. Understanding where a programme sits within this framework can help organisations refine their approaches, ensuring goal-setting enhances the mentoring experience rather than restricting it.

Understanding Mentoring in the Broader Young people Support Landscape

Mentoring actions often **intersect with other forms of support for young people** and can sometimes be perceived as a "catch-all" term (Hall, 2003). Whilst mentoring encompasses a wide range of support, these other services share certain features and fulfil distinct roles within the broader **context of young people development.** Programmes may utilise one of these forms of support or combine several based on the focus and needs of their young people (Irby, 2018). Since mentoring **interventions do not operate in isolation,** it is crucial to consider the **full spectrum of services available** to create a continuum of actions that effectively support young people on their journey. Understanding the **unique value that mentoring brings** within this ecosystem is particularly important in advocating for its place and purpose, ensuring that it is **recognised as a distinct and**

essential component of young people development rather than an interchangeable or secondary intervention.

Coaching focuses on achieving specific goals or improving certain skills, such as public speaking or self-confidence. A coach works with the individual to develop a goal or skill and is considered an expert in their field. The relationship is typically unidirectional, with the coach providing guidance to help the individual reach a defined objective.

Tutoring is **centred on academic goals,** such as improving grades or preparing for exams. A tutor, qualified in the subject, focuses on addressing specific academic challenges, providing tailored support to help the individual achieve success. Tutoring is typically a unidirectional relationship where the tutor imparts knowledge.

Career advice primarily centres on guiding individuals **toward potential career paths and opportunities.** This service is usually provided directly at schools and young people or job centres. A career adviser offers insights based on their professional expertise and understanding of the job market, assisting individuals in making informed choices about their professional futures. Similar to coaching and tutoring, career advice typically follows a unidirectional model.

In contrast to coaching, tutoring, and career advice, mentoring provides a **more open-ended and holistic approach to supporting young people.** Unlike the unidirectional nature of the other services, mentoring fosters a **reciprocal relationship** where both the mentor and mentee can **benefit and grow together.** This dynamic allows for the exploration of a broader range of personal and professional development areas tailored to the mentee's unique needs and aspirations. The flexibility and depth of mentoring make it a powerful complement to the more targeted and outcome-driven approaches presented above.

7. Why Youth Mentoring Matters: Social Impact and Opportunities for Young people

7.1 Bridging the Gap: Understanding Young people Realities in the UK

Navigating the Landscape of NEET Young people in the UK: Looking at the numbers

According to the latest 2024 figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), **13.4% of UK young people aged 16-24 are classified as NEET** (Not

in Education, Employment or Training)[36]. This equates to approximately 900,000 individuals, or **one in every eight young people.** This marks a significant increase from 9.5% in 2021, during the Covid pandemic. (ONS, 2024).

Since 2021, **NEET rates have risen, particularly amongst young men.** As of February 2024, the inactivity rate for young people in the UK **approached its highest level since 1992** (Francis-Devine & Powell, 2024). The Youth Futures Foundation report, *Young people Employment 2024 Outlook*[37], suggests that if the UK matched the lowest NEET rate in the OECD[38], that of the Netherlands, the full potential of more young people could be unleashed, adding £69bn to UK's GDP over the long term[39].

Meanwhile, **OECD countries[40] have reduced NEET rates by an average of 25% since 2002,** whilst the UK only saw a **19% decrease**. Reducing this percentage includes comprehensive policies, preventative measures, reintegration strategies, and active labour market policies. For example, **Austria's Training Guarantee** ensures access to apprenticeships for young people up to the age of 25, and the **Netherlands provides vocational education and training (VET)** that combines classroom learning with practical experience for smoother workforce transitions.

The same Youth Futures Foundation report outlines the significant barriers young people face in today's post-pandemic world, highlighting **economic challenges, skills mismatches, and mental health issues.** Survey results from 2,500 young individuals reveal that **62% feel it is more difficult to find a job** than a decade ago, whilst **44% identify a lack of skills or training** as the most significant barrier to entering the workforce. Additionally, **31% report experiencing mental health conditions,** with 85% of this group believing their condition impacts their job prospects.

Individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly ethnic minorities from low-income households, face compounded challenges due to systemic

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[36] For more information: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/may2024

[37] See full report here: https://young peoplefuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Young people-Employment-2024-Outlook.pdf

[38] The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development is an international organisation that aims to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity, and well-being. It seeks to establish evidence-based international standards and solutions to a range of social, economic and environmental challenges.

[39] See full report here: https://young peoplefuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Young people-Employment-2024-Outlook.pdf

[40] There are 38 OECD countries. See full list of members here: https://www.oecd.org/en/about/members-partners.html

inequities and biases. A 2015 report from the UK Department of Education[41] indicated that schools in underprivileged areas often **lack resources, experienced teachers, and advanced academic opportunities,** resulting in significant disparities in educational achievement. This lack of access and **insufficient career guidance and support** leave students ill-prepared for the job market. The Youth Future Foundation's findings on *Discrimination and Young people*[42] report also highlight that **biases and racial discrimination in the labour market** exacerbate employment disparities, mainly affecting Black young people.

Both reports emphasise **targeted interventions to address these disparities,** advocating for more intensive support for marginalised young people at risk of becoming NEET. Enhancing the support available to schools and colleges is crucial for preparing these young people for successful transitions into employment. Implementing tailored mentoring programmes can provide personalised guidance, essential skill development, and increased self-confidence, ultimately empowering these young peoples to pursue pathways to higher education, training, or employment.

Understanding the Root Causes of Young people at Risk of Becoming NEET

To design impactful mentoring interventions, it is essential to first understand the systemic factors that contribute to young people becoming NEET. Mentoring programmes have historically been framed as solutions for "disaffected young people" (Piper and Piper, 2010). Disaffected young people are often defined as those who feel disconnected from mainstream society, characterised by disengagement from education, social isolation, and involvement in risky behaviours. Piper and Piper (2010) argue that using this definition in policies and practices is problematic because **it portrays young people as passive and fails to acknowledge the systemic inequalities that contribute to their circumstances.** Instead, they suggest that **mentoring should focus on specific goals valued by young people** rather than addressing broad and often subjective categories such as disaffection or disengagement. They further advocate for an educative approach within mentoring, **helping young people understand not just how to navigate their circumstances but also how those circumstances came to exist in the first place.**

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[41] See full report here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a74bb8d40f0b619c8659fc3/RR439A-Ethnic_minorities_and_attainment_the_effects_of_poverty.pdf

[42] For full report here :https://young peoplefuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Discrimination-and-work-report.pdf

As this report seeks to identify best practices for mentoring in the UK, it is crucial to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and recognise the complexity of young people's circumstances. In their 2023 report[43], the National Centre for Social Research highlights five key domains of marginalisation, each of which significantly increases the likelihood of a young person becoming NEET:

- **Education:** having a special educational need, absence from school, exclusion or expulsion, low parental involvement, and low academic attainment.
- **Family circumstances**: having caring responsibilities after the age of 16, having a parent with a disability, having lived in a single-parent household, neither parent having a qualification, having been in care or living apart from their birth parents in childhood, and having had a child of their own.
- **Health:** having had a limiting disability or health condition and having had a mental health problem.
- **Living standards:** having lived in social housing whilst growing up and in a household where either parent was unemployed.
- **Risky behaviour:** engaged in anti-social behaviour and had their parents contacted about their behaviour by either the police or by a social or educational welfare service.

The report also highlights that these **risk factors often overlap, creating multiple disadvantages that reinforce each other** and make it harder for young people to engage in education, training, or employment. Certain groups face even higher risks: young people from low-income households, those identifying as bisexual, non-binary, or from Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi backgrounds were found to be particularly vulnerable to becoming NEET.

Therefore, adopting a **multidimensional approach to youth mentoring** ensures that programmes target young people who face multiple forms of marginalisation. For mentoring interventions to be truly effective, they must address these complexities rather than treating all young people as a homogenous group. This aligns with the best practices outlined in this report, particularly those focused on embedding social justice, trauma-informed practices, and stronger collaboration between mentoring organisations and community services. **Targeting young people with an understanding of their lived realities allows mentoring to be a more**

[43] For more information: https://young peoplefuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/OVERLA2.pdf

effective tool in breaking cycles of exclusion and creating pathways for long-term success.

7.2. The Impact Mentoring Interventions Can Have for Young people

Understanding the root causes of young people becoming NEET helps mentoring programmes **target support where it matters most.** By understanding where mentoring is most effective—whether in **providing social capital, career guidance, emotional support, or academic encouragement—**programmes can be designed to address the **specific needs** of the young people they serve.

Rather than applying a **one-size-fits-all** approach, mentoring should be **tailored** to support young people facing different challenges. This ensures that interventions not only help mentees navigate immediate obstacles but also **equip them with the tools and networks** needed to sustain long-term success in multiple aspects. Building on our research, this report highlights **six key areas where mentoring can have the greatest impact on young people.** We will explore the following areas in detail, demonstrating how mentoring serves as a **powerful tool for personal, educational, and professional growth.**

Youth Mentoring as a Tool to Empower Young people during Transitions

Young people are increasingly **vulnerable during transitional periods,** such as moving from education to employment or navigating personal challenges (Rhodes, 2005). NEET young people are particularly affected by transitions, as these periods "*can be particularly challenging due to the myriad changes they involve, including shifts in social networks, increased responsibility, and uncertainty about the future*" (Philip and Spratt, 2007). To effectively support young people during these **critical transitions,** mentoring programmes should align their interventions with the **Key Stages**[44] of the UK education system. Each stage presents distinct **challenges and opportunities**, making it crucial for mentoring initiatives to tailor their support accordingly:

- **Key Stage 3 (11–14 years):** Adolescents develop social skills, self-esteem, resilience and confidence at this stage.
- **Key Stage 4 (14–16 years):** Young people face academic preparation, such as GCSEs and decide whether they would like to pursue Sixth Form, college or a vocational route.
- **Key Stage 5 (16–18 years):** Young people prepare for their A-levels or vocational qualifications such as BTECs, whilst others complete apprenticeships or other work-based learning. At this stage, they

[44] Key Stages from https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum

must decide whether they pursue Higher Education, apprenticeships or a professional route.

Mentoring programmes can provide vital support, as they "can play a critical role in providing young people with the guidance and support they need to navigate these transitions successfully" (Philip and Spratt, 2007).

When asked about The Diana Award Mentoring programme[45], a mentee from Leeds declared it **"improves work skills, team communication and knowledge about future options".** When asked, another mentee from Birmingham states, **"I am more confident at working in a group setting. I understand CVs and apprenticeships".** When thinking about the transition towards the professional road, a mentee from Birmingham declared feeling prepared, as The Diana Award Mentoring programme has **"taught me how my life and jobs would be in the real world".**

Youth Mentoring to Improve Educational Achievement

Youth mentoring interventions are well-known for their focus on educational achievement. They can **develop skills that enhance academic success and foster school belonging and supportive networks.** According to research, mentored young people are more likely to feel connected to their school (Black et al., 2010), have better grades (Chang et al., 2010), attend higher education (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Reynolds & Parrish, 2018) or receive a bachelor's degree (Erickson et al., 2009; Fruiht & Chen, 2018; Miranda-Chan et al., 2016). Furthermore, mentoring **cultivates positive role models** within schools or communities who can inspire mentees to pursue their goals. This also encourages supportive networks around the mentee, connecting them with other mentees or mentors in their school and community (Gowdy & Spencer, 2024).

Young people who participated in The Diana Award Mentoring Programme reflected on the changes they noticed in themselves since becoming mentees, one from Birmingham stating, **"Since joining the programme, I've learned to express my thoughts more during teamwork and class discussions and to contemplate my future more deeply."**

[45] All mentee citations from this section are from the Diana Award Mentoring programme cohort from 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. The quotes are from the programmes conducted in Leeds, London, Jersey and Birmingham.

Another from Leeds says, "I know more about the work environment and college and university."

Youth Mentoring for Personal Growth and Skills Development

Mentors can help young people identify their strengths, set individual goals, and develop leadership and decision-making skills that build confidence and independence (Clutterbuck & Lane, 2004). Mentoring can provide mentees with **crucial skill development for future employment,** as a mentoring relationship fosters communication, teamwork and other soft skills (Rowland *et al.*, 2024). According to a report from the European Commission[46] (2011), soft skills are non-job-specific skills related to individual ability to operate effectively in the workplace. The UK Government's Young people Unemployment Committee reports that communication and teamwork are the core skills employers look for, also known as soft skills (UK Parliament, 2021).

When reflecting on how their skills have changed thanks to their mentoring experience with The Diana Award Mentoring programme, a mentee from London remarked, **"My confidence and goal-setting skills have significantly improved."** Another mentee from Jersey added, **"I now communicate more comfortably with older individuals and recognise effective strategies when participating in team settings."**

Another mentee from the Leeds Diana Award Mentoring programme shared, "Speaking in public used to make me very anxious, but after these sessions, I've learned and improved immensely." Another noted, "I have gained a better understanding of others' personalities, particularly in the workplace."

When asked to describe the mentoring program, one mentee from London highlighted its value, saying, **"Transitional skills for your average workplace that school never teaches you".** Another said that the programme **"Helped explain how to act in the workplace and improved communication skills."**

Youth Mentoring for Career Guidance and signposting to opportunities

Mentoring supports young individuals in **expanding their knowledge and exploring opportunities.** Mentors can guide young people in developing essential employability skills such as CV writing, interview preparation, and workplace etiquette, which are crucial for securing and succeeding in employment (Young people Futures Foundation, 2024).

[46] Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Young people at risk of being NEET in Key Stage 4 and 5 encounter difficult decisions about their future and can lack the necessary resources and guidance to make confident choices. For many, they may be the first in their families to think about higher education or further training options. Discussing their possibilities with a mentor and learning about their mentor's experiences can profoundly impact their decisions and ambitions. According to the research, those who have a mentor in adolescence are more likely to be employed in young adulthood (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005), have a bank account or own a car (Greeson et al., 2010), and have higher incomes (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018).

When asked about their mentoring experiences with The Diana Award Mentoring programme, a mentee from Leeds declared that they had **"developed new skills in teamwork"** and felt **"more confident in writing a CV and in interview skills".** Another mentee from Birmingham shared, **"They have taught me how my life and jobs would be in the real world."** A mentee from London stated, **"It has changed and prepared me for the workplace".**

Youth Mentoring to Support Youth Well-being

Mentoring relationships offer emotional support and a safe space for young people to discuss challenges, improving their overall **well-being** (Eby et al., 2008) and **resilience** (Philip and Spratt, 2007). A multi-site trial in the UK with 17 organisations with short-term mentoring programmes demonstrated positive outcomes, including an increase in mentees' self-confidence, problem-solving and decision-making, teamwork, social skills, resilience and emotional regulation (Rowland *et al.*, 2024).

"I have seen a boost in my confidence and my self-esteem", declares a mentee from Leeds who was asked to reflect on the impact The Diana Award Mentoring programme had on him. Another from London noticed, **"I have grown closer to my peers and feel comfortable sharing my opinions"** and so does another one from Leeds: **"I have become more confident in speaking out loud"** or **"I am more confident, and people made me feel more comfortable."**

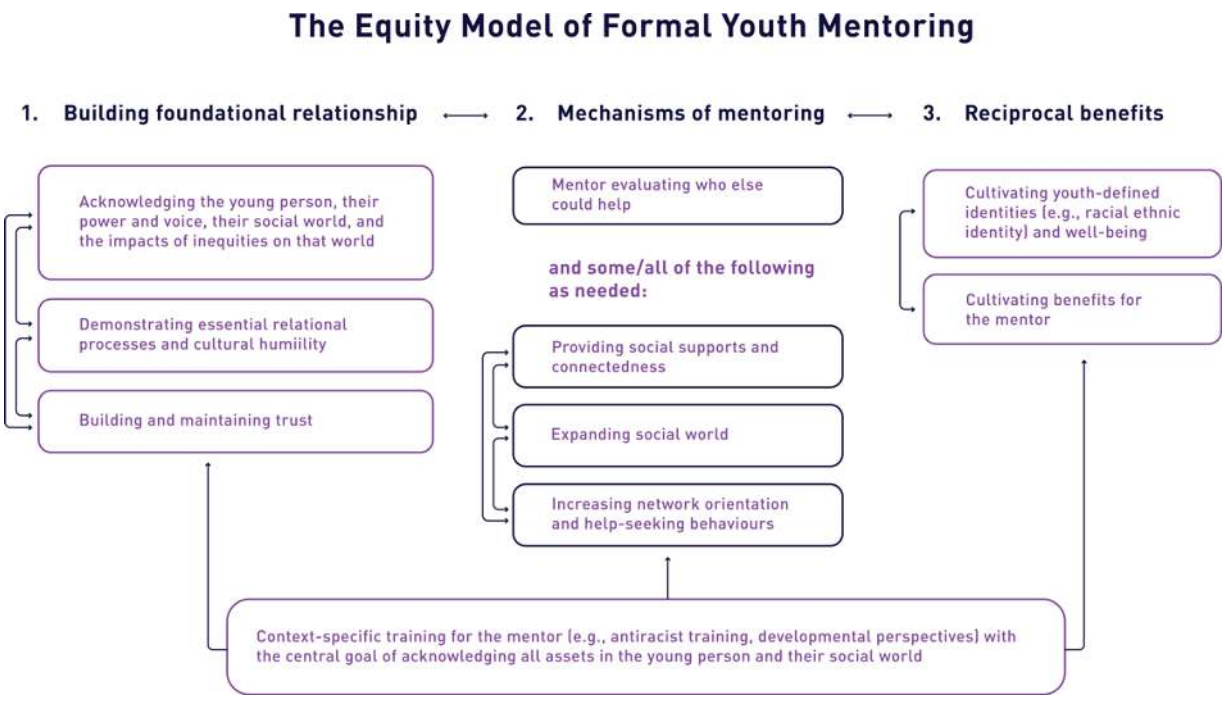
Peer mentoring interventions have also been proven to improve mental health and foster a sense of participation amongst both mentors and mentees (Stapley *et al.*, 2021). **"I'm able to put my ideas/opinions forward without worrying about being judged",** declares another mentee from The Diana Award Mentoring programme in London.

Youth Mentoring to Enhance Social Capital and Economic Mobility

Supportive relationships with adults are essential for young people to thrive, yet these connections are often less accessible to low-income and

marginalised young people (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). **Social capital is typically formed through interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and community members** (Gowdy et al., 2024). Teachers, for example, serve as informal mentors and network brokers, either expanding or restricting a young person's access to resources.

However, **not all young people have equal access to these social connections,** making formal mentoring programmes a crucial tool for bridging the gap. By connecting young people with mentors outside their immediate circles, these programmes act as **pathways to socioeconomic resources and opportunities,** increasing mentees' social capital (Sullivan & Larson, 2009; Comfort, 2023). When designed with a **social capital lens,** mentoring interventions can actively **address structural inequalities and promote social justice** by empowering marginalised young people. Gowdy et al. (2024) Equity Model (figure below) highlights the importance of equitable support, guiding mentors, families, and communities in fostering relationships that enable young people to become agents of change.



Youth Mentoring and Social Mobility

Social mobility remains a persistent challenge in the UK. **Systemic barriers disproportionately limit opportunities for low-income young people**, with only 14% securing top jobs compared to 23% in Germany or 19% in France (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). The UK ranks 27th out of 38 OECD countries for social mobility (OECD, 2021), **reinforcing the urgency for targeted interventions.**

Informal mentoring relationships—where non-parental adults provide guidance in education and career pathways—**can play a critical role in improving social mobility** (Gowdy, 2024). Research highlights that **community-based mentoring programmes** are particularly effective in expanding mentees' support networks. By fostering **emotional support, academic guidance, and professional connections,** these programmes help bridge access to education, employment, and social resources. Studies show how mentoring interventions for **marginalised** young people significantly increase educational attainment, job opportunities, and economic stability (Larose & Tarabulsy, 2014; PMC, 2021).

Youth Mentoring and Economic Mobility

While large-scale structural changes are necessary to address economic inequality, mentoring **plays a vital role in promoting mobility at an individual level.** Mentors help young people develop essential skills, expand professional networks, and raise their aspirations for the future (Bogle et al., 2016). As mentioned previously, mentored young people achieve better academic outcomes, higher university enrolment rates, and greater financial stability in adulthood (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hagler & Rhodes, 2018).

However, not all mentoring relationships equally foster economic mobility. Studies suggest that young people mentored by non-family members, particularly those who establish strong bonds with their mentors, tend to achieve better educational and career outcomes (Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2005). In contrast, low-income young people are more likely to have family mentors focused on immediate needs rather than long-term career development, limiting their potential for upward mobility (Raposa et al., 2018).

Additionally, mentoring outcomes vary depending on a mentee's socioeconomic background. Gowdy, Miller & Spencer (2020) highlight that **mentoring often amplifies existing advantages for middle-income young people**—an example of the "Matthew Effect,"[47] where those with initial advantages continue to gain more over time (Merton, 1968; Mitnik et al., 2015). For low-income young people, mentoring relationships often address urgent, short-term challenges rather than career progression, reducing their impact on long-term economic mobility. This underscores the importance of designing mentoring programmes that provide targeted career support, networking opportunities, and skill development to ensure

[47] The **Matthew Effect** is a concept that describes how advantages and disadvantages tend to accumulate over time, often reinforcing existing inequalities. It is commonly summed up by the phrase: **"The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer."**

that all young people, regardless of background, can benefit from the full potential of mentoring.

The increasing NEET rates in the UK highlight the **urgent need for targeted interventions that address systemic inequalities** and the multiple risk factors faced by young people. Economic challenges, educational barriers, and a lack of access to social capital disproportionately affect marginalised young people, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage. Research underscores the importance of mentoring in bridging these gaps, offering tailored guidance that fosters personal development, career readiness, and social mobility. However, for mentoring to be truly effective, programmes must move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and instead cater to the diverse needs of young people from different backgrounds.

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8. Models That Work: Mentoring Interventions to Address Young people Diverse Needs in the UK.

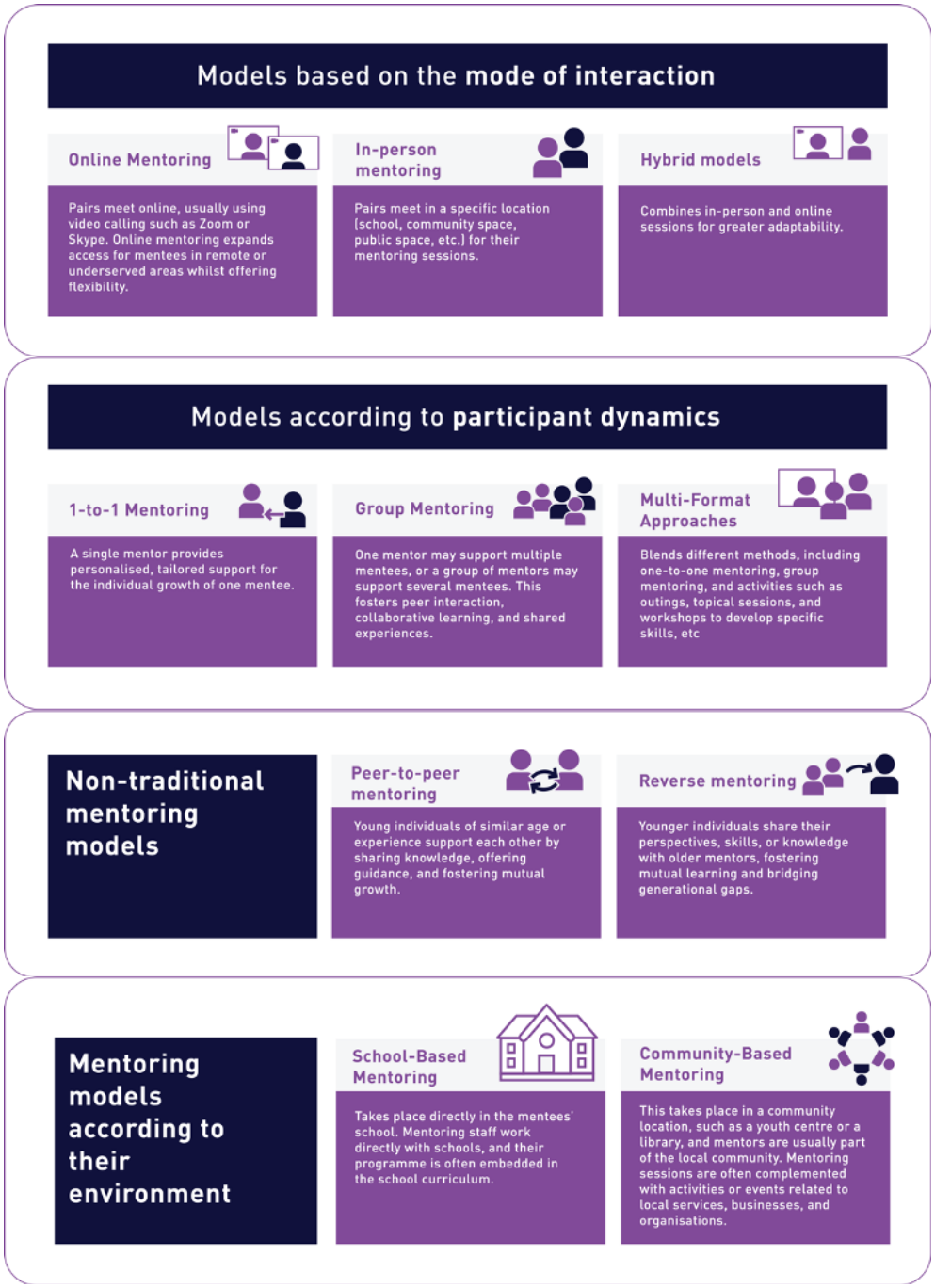
This section builds directly on the findings from the previous parts of the report by shifting the focus from **why youth mentoring is needed to how it is implemented in practice** across the UK. By analysing these existing models that work, we aim to provide a clearer understanding of the strengths and limitations within the UK mentoring landscape. This discussion serves as a foundation for the **recommendations outlined in Chapter 2,** which propose strategies to improve mentoring effectiveness and ensure its long-term impact on young people development and social mobility.

8.1 Understanding the UK Mentoring Landscape: Characteristics and Strengths of Youth Mentoring Programmes

Existing mentoring models in the UK

Throughout the interviews and the research conducted for this report, a diversity of mentoring formats has emerged, demonstrating how the **mentoring landscape has adapted to the UK context.** Mentoring programmes in the UK employ a variety of formats beyond traditional one-to-one models. They often direct the relationship to be a means to a specific end (Cavell et al., 2021) and can be both school-based or community-based. Mentors can be paid staff members, volunteers or both. These formats are tailored to meet the unique **needs of mentees, organisational goals, and available resources.** Whilst we have highlighted the most common

characteristics of mentoring programmes and believe they are representative; the following list is limited to the scope of this report. This list is not exclusive; a mentoring programme can fall into several of these categories. Key features include:



Strengths Driving UK Mentoring Programmes

When interviewing the mentoring organisations, we quickly identified some commonalities that emerged across the different programmes. These were all shared points specific to the context and young people of the UK, which the organisations felt significantly increased their impact.

- **Well-Rounded Programmes**

Mentoring programmes that were interviewed often **extend beyond the mentoring relationship** by incorporating activities such as networking and local events, coaching sessions, or social action projects. For instance, **Football Beyond Borders** incorporate football practices in their mentoring programme, which allows mentees to apply the skills they have learned in their sessions in real life situations (teamwork, managing emotions) while fostering peer relationships. This diverse approach provides a comprehensive framework for mentee development, allowing participants to broaden their networks, build essential skills, and engage more deeply with the programme. This will enable mentees to develop holistically and transition in a healthy manner after concluding their mentoring relationship (Garringer et al., 2016).

- **Focus on Vulnerable Young people for Social Mobility**

The youth mentoring programmes that participated in the report prioritised **young people at risk of becoming NEET as key beneficiaries to increase social mobility.** Research highlights the importance of mentoring in bridging these gaps and assisting these young people to build the skills and confidence necessary to navigate educational and career pathways effectively (Albright, Hurd and Hussain, 2017). Mentoring not only empowers individual mentees but also contributes to fostering long-term social mobility within society. (Gowdy et al., 2024).

- **Young people-Led Approach**

Most of the mentoring programmes that were interviewed incorporated elements of a **young people-led approach in their programmes**, empowering mentees to shape their mentoring journeys and actively participate in decision-making processes. Research shows that when mentees are seen as active agents, they are more engaged in mentoring interventions (Comfort, 2024) (Philip and Spratt, 2007).

- **Connection to Wider Community and Networks**

Staff members from mentoring programmes emphasised the **need to connect young people to broader communities and professional networks.** These programmes facilitate relationships beyond the mentor-mentee dynamic, encouraging mentees to engage with alumni or attend networking events. Research shows that access to extended communities increases a mentee's social capital, helps them navigate complex career pathways, and cultivates resilience (Garringer et al., 2016).

- **Inclusive Practices**

Mentoring programmes interviewed strived to prioritise inclusivity, ensuring mentees and mentors from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds can participate in mentoring. For instance, organisations such

as The Diana Award, Brightside or the Access Project use specific criteria to identify mentees: free school meals or social mobility indicators. Free school meal access in the UK is based on socio-economic factors and is often used as an indicator of a student's socio-economic status. Research also emphasises that mentoring interventions should include social justice approaches in their curricula and mentor training, ensuring that mentoring helps reduce inequality (Albright, Hurd and Hussain, 2017).

8.2 The Road Ahead: Ongoing Gaps and Challenges of Mentoring Programmes in the UK

As we identified key strengths within mentoring programmes, several shared gaps and challenges also became apparent across the organisations we interviewed. By highlighting these gaps, we aim to shed light on areas that require further support and improvement. The recommendations outlined in Chapter 2 are designed to address these challenges, offering a roadmap to strengthen mentoring services. We hope to help the field overcome these barriers and enhance the overall mentoring experience for both mentors and mentees.

- **Misunderstanding of What Mentoring Is**

Interviews highlighted that mentoring is often **misunderstood and used as a catch-all phrase.** Many interviewees expressed concerns that policymakers and decision-makers lack awareness of the extensive work involved in mentoring, what it truly entails, and its impact. This knowledge gap can create significant challenges for organisations in securing funding and maintaining stability.

Additionally, some organisations working with young people workers noted **that mentoring is sometimes seen as the default solution** simply because there are few other programmes available for young people. This can result in referrals that do not align with what mentoring is designed to achieve, potentially affecting both the quality and effectiveness of mentoring interventions.

A mentoring professional highlights how mentoring is often perceived as a cost-effective solution rather than a structured, intentional practice:

> **"[Mentoring] is not seen as the big bright shiny thing, but it's seen as a cheap thing. We work with volunteers, and people think volunteers come for free. [...] We all know as people working in mentoring that you can do more damage than good by giving someone a mentor without proper structure, without proper training, without knowing what you're doing. So it can sometimes feel like people want mentoring, but they want it on the cheap [...]."**

A focus group participant emphasised that rushing to achieve high numbers of mentor-mentee matches without considering relationship-building can be counterproductive:

> **"The last thing you want to do is rush into matching; be focused on getting loads of numbers and active matches. [...] Unless you're doing it right, you're doing more damage than good. And it's trying to get funders, governments, and local authorities to understand that this is not a quick fix. This is a really good relationship-based practice, and it is very worthwhile, but unless you do it right, you actually shouldn't be doing it at all. And that's where it's difficult."**

Another concern raised was the lack of attention from the government regarding the time and effort required to build meaningful mentoring relationships:

> **"I think there is a lack of attention from the government about how important relationship-building is in mentoring relationships and how long that actually takes. And so I think there are too many people looking at mentoring as if these can be short-term fixes."**

- **Geographical Inequities**

Participant organisations feel that **mentoring programmes in the UK are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas**, particularly in cities like London, where mentees and mentors have greater access to opportunities and resources. This urban focus is often driven by targeted funding for vulnerable young people in cities and a larger pool of available volunteers. In rural areas, securing financing is significantly more challenging, and logistical barriers include limited transport options for mentors and mentees. These geographical inequities can create imbalances in access to mentoring services, leaving many young peoples in underserved areas without crucial support.

One practitioner highlighted how mentoring is often relied upon because of a lack of alternative support options rather than because it is always the best solution:

> **"[Mentoring] is seen as a key tool in the box. The only other problem is that the toolbox is empty of other tools. And so it's the only place that people can go. [...] It's just that there's nothing else to solve the problems."**

- **Mentor Recruitment and Diversity**

Most organisations reported **challenges in recruiting mentors** due to competition for volunteers with other organisations, limited time, capacity and resources from organisations to effectively attract mentors and a general undervaluing of volunteering, amongst other factors. Additionally,

they highlighted difficulties in fostering diversity within the mentor pool, often attracting similar profiles—predominantly women from a high socio-economic background. A diverse mentoring pool is essential to ensure relatability, representation, and cultural understanding for mentees. Matching mentees with mentors from similar backgrounds or experiences fosters trust and relatability between them, inspires mentees and provides culturally relevant support (Albright, 2017). A mentoring organisation mentioned during the interviews the importance of:

> **"Financially making volunteering viable to have mentors from different background".**

Despite efforts to expand mentor recruitment strategies, inefficiencies in matching mentees with suitable mentors persist, often delaying engagement. One practitioner highlights the challenges in referral processes:

> **"The inefficiency we have is the time from referral to finding the mentor because actually, we can go through all their checks and training [...], but we are waiting for a suitable match. So you may have a mentor in your kind of group of mentors ready to be matched to a child. But actually, if they're not suitable, [...] it goes back to that mentor pool and retention."**

- **Difficulty in Engaging with Schools and Other Stakeholders**

Interviewed organisations emphasised the challenges of establishing and maintaining strong, sustainable partnerships with schools. They attributed these difficulties to **limited time, resources, and capacity**, as well as **high staff turnover among schools and partner organisations.** Many mentoring programmes rely on collaboration with schools to identify young people in need, gain access to them, and coordinate mentoring sessions. However, these logistical and structural barriers often hinder the effectiveness and continuity of such partnerships.

Additionally, some mentors shared during our interviews that they **encountered obstacles due to a lack of engagement from schools,** which significantly impacted the **delivery and consistency of mentoring sessions.** One mentor expressed their frustration with a school that failed to integrate the programme properly:

> **"I had a really bad experience with mine [school]. Because I don't think they knew what they were signing up to. They cancelled us. Then we did three weeks on, and they were kind of treating me like a detention. They were just putting people in and taking people out. Teachers were talking in there."**

- **Instability of Mentoring Programmes Due to Underfunding**

All organisations interviewed mentioned that **securing funding remained their main challenge.** The Young people Development Fund highlighted in their interview that mentoring needs **greater funding recognition as a critical component of young people development** rather than being treated as an afterthought.

Underfunding makes it difficult to retain qualified staff, creating programme instability. This instability affects the consistency of mentoring interventions, affecting the trust and continuity in relationships with young people. Moreover, without enough resources, programmes struggle to sustain long-term initiatives or evaluate their impact, which, in turn, impacts their sustainability and long-term vision for programme development. Many organisations also raised concerns about **the lack of consistent government support** and **frequent shifts in parliamentary priorities**, which further threaten the stability of mentoring initiatives. **Government enthusiasm for mentoring often does not translate into sustained financial backing**, with funding being allocated in short-term cycles that make long-term planning difficult.

One organisation interviewed highlights the contradiction between government enthusiasm for mentoring and the insufficient funding to sustain quality initiatives:

> **"In terms of government, it is seen as a great initiative that will help in so many ways. But actually, the funding never backs that. It's always such a quick fix. [...] we haven't got the structure to support them [young people] with the needs that they require."**

Another organisation also raises concerns about the precarious nature of funding, which affects all mentoring organisations:

> **"We are at the mercy of the funders as well. Mentor-mentee relationships, especially young people ones, build over time. You have to build the rapport and the trust before you even get into perhaps what's going on there and the challenges that develop from that."**

Furthermore, funding challenges directly affect staff retention, which in turn impacts the effectiveness of mentoring programmes. A staff member from the voluntary sector reflects on the difficulties of sustaining trained professionals within mentoring organisations:

> **"Funding kind of sits underneath all this because the reason we have a recruitment issue is because we keep making staff**

redundant, or they can see their contracts coming to an end, and so they're looking for something else. So as much as we're on a cycle of training people a [...]our programmes are one to two years funding. You get halfway through that, and it's very difficult then to recruit someone for less than a year. So we're carrying the risk of recruiting people on permanent contracts, not fixed-term because the calibre of staff we get for a fixed-term is not the same. But that puts a lot of risk on us as a voluntary sector organisation."

- **Lack of Collaboration Between Organisations**

Many organisations interviewed acknowledged that they **tend to "work in their corner"**, **operating in isolation**, often unaware of what other mentoring organisations are doing. This **fragmented approach** limits opportunities for **knowledge-sharing, resource pooling, and collective advocacy**, reducing the overall effectiveness of mentoring interventions.

Recognising the need for greater collaboration, the Informal Mentoring Network, led by The Diana Award, has taken steps to increase visibility and connectivity within the sector. This platform provides a space for organisations to share best practices, exchange ideas, and discuss common challenges. The network includes mentoring providers, academics, and professionals with expertise in young people development, fostering a more integrated mentoring ecosystem.

While progress is being made through initiatives like this report, further efforts are needed to **build a more connected and cooperative mentoring landscape** in the UK. Increased collaboration will not only **enhance the effectiveness of individual programmes** but also **drive structural change**, ensuring mentoring is recognised as a vital tool for supporting young people development and social mobility.

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9. Conclusions

Mentoring is a powerful tool for reducing NEET rates, improving social mobility, and enhancing young people well-being. Over the past years, it has gained increasing recognition as a key strategy for social inclusion: governments incorporate mentoring into public policies, and corporations embrace it as a way to foster inclusive workplaces and professional development. This growing interest has elevated the profile of mentoring. Still, it has also led to a wide range of interpretations and practices—some of which lack the core elements that define effective mentoring.

To maintain the effectiveness of mentoring, the sector must clearly define what constitutes quality mentoring services and identify the key success factors that ensure positive outcomes for young people. We hope this report serves as a valuable contribution toward that goal. High-impact mentoring relies on structured relationships, well-trained mentors, and a commitment to consistent support, yet the field remains fragmented. Mentoring programmes face ongoing instability without structural backing, sustainable funding, and policy alignment, limiting their long-term impact.

A major opportunity for the UK mentoring sector lies in strengthening collaboration between organisations. Greater coordination and networking will allow mentoring providers to share resources, best practices, and referral pathways to ensure that every young person receives the support they need. By working together, mentoring organisations can also advocate for systemic change, secure long-term funding, and solidify mentoring as a recognised and valued intervention in young people development.

The Diana Award (TDA) and the organisations from the Informal Mentoring Network are well-positioned to lead in shaping the future of mentoring in the UK. By driving policy change, fostering collaboration, and enhancing impact measurement, TDA can help create an ecosystem where mentoring is widely accessible, adequately supported, and embedded in national strategies for young people development and social mobility.

However, for mentoring to reach its full potential, a collective effort is needed. The passion and dedication of those working in the field are evident, but the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Mentoring must continue its efforts to unify the sector's voice at the policy level. Without sustained advocacy, mentoring risks being overlooked in broader young people development discussions. Strengthening representation in policymaking and ensuring mentoring remains a priority within government, business, and funding agendas will be crucial to securing its long-term sustainability and impact.

Mentoring is more than just a service—it is a tool that connects people from different backgrounds, creating relationships that would not exist otherwise. It is a commitment to supporting young people through meaningful, personal connections that inspire growth, confidence, and opportunity. As a mentor reflected during our interviews, **"I've really helped somebody today, and that's always a really nice feeling."**

This sentiment captures the heart of mentoring—it transforms lives, not only for mentees but also for mentors and the wider community. It reinforces trust in human connection, support systems, and the belief that everyone deserves guidance and opportunity.

The way forward is clear: **collaborate, measure and advocate.** While there are no quick fixes, the impact of getting this right is profound. A well-

structured, well-supported mentoring sector will not only strengthen the UK's social and economic fabric but also empower thousands of young people to find the path that is right for them. Now is the time to take action—to unite, to invest, and to champion mentoring as a vital force for change.

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11. Annexes

1) Theory of Change Guiding This Report

The **Theory of Change** for this report reflects TDA's strategic objectives and their role in the UK mentoring ecosystem. It is built on the understanding that mentoring can transform young people's lives, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, when delivered effectively and inclusively.

TDA's Strategic Objectives Through Mentoring

1. **Improving Young people Outcomes:** Enhance workplace readiness, instil active citizenship, and increase social mobility for young people aged 11–18 through mentoring interventions and campaigns. These efforts specifically target those who face the most significant barriers to success.
2. **Advocating for Change:** Serve as a national voice for mentoring in the UK, advocating for policies that reduce the stark birth-to-work inequalities experienced by disadvantaged young people.
3. **Corporate Engagement:** Encourage businesses and organisations across the UK to invest time (as mentors) and resources (financial contributions) in local mentoring opportunities. These partnerships benefit young people, help companies develop internal skill sets, and build socially responsible frameworks that foster inclusivity and equity.

Therefore, the report's Theory of Change includes:

- **High-Quality Interventions:** Evidence-based mentoring interventions can empower young people by building their agency, confidence, and career readiness.
- **Collaborative Ecosystem:** A collaborative, inclusive mentoring ecosystem— supported by networks like the Informal Mentoring Network —can effectively address systemic barriers and expand opportunities for underserved young people.
- **Driving Social Impact:** Mentoring programmes are critical for enhancing social mobility, skills development, and overall well-being, contributing to a fairer and more equitable society.

By aligning with TDA's strategic goals and leveraging the collective power of the Informal Mentoring Network, this report provides a framework for actionable change in the mentoring sector.

2) Definition of Common Terms

This report features a section that defines mentoring format interventions, drawing on various perspectives from the literature review. To ensure clarity, we have adopted the following definitions for key terms used throughout the document:

- **All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Mentoring:** All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) are informal cross-party groups that have no official status within Parliament. They are run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords, though many choose to involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities. The Diana Award previously served as secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Mentoring.
- **Befriending:** A relationship between two or more individuals which is initiated, supported and monitored by an agency that has defined one or more parties as likely to benefit ideally the relationship is non-judgemental, mutual and purposeful and there is a commitment over time.
- **Community-based mentoring:** Programmes that predominantly take place in the community.
- **Disaffected Young people:** Defined as those who feel disconnected from mainstream society, characterised by disengagement from education, social isolation, and involvement in risky behaviours.
- **Formal mentoring:** Formal mentoring indicates that the relationship between mentor and mentee is formalised and explicitly recognised. In most instances, this means that both mentor and mentee participate in a mentoring programme that expressly recognises the mentoring relationship and usually involves matching a selected young person (mentee) to another individual (mentor).
- **Group mentoring:** Programmes in which a group of mentors works with a group of young people, in which multiple mentors work with a single young person, or multiple young people work with one mentor. These can be school- or community-based.
- **Informal Network of Mentoring Organisations:** The informal network of mentoring organisations (the Informal Mentoring Network) was created in mid-2023, after the need for it was identified during a networking and discussion session with the APPG on Mentoring. The Network provides a platform for organisations to share ideas and challenges and to identify clear asks and messaging to bring to parliamentarians at APPG Meetings. The Network is made up of representatives from a range of organisations that deliver mentoring interventions, as well as academics with expertise in mentoring.

- **Matching:** The process of pairing up a mentor with a mentee.
- **Mentee:** The individual receiving mentoring, sometimes also referred in literature and practice as protégé(e) or apprentice.
- **Mentor:** The individual supporting, guiding and helping another, usually more inexperienced, individual. Sometimes referred to as 'volunteers'.
- **Mentoring provider:** The organisation, institution or team that provides the mentoring programme.
- **Mentoring relationship:** The relationship between the mentor and mentee; in the case of this report, the relationship which has been created through the mentoring programme.
- **NEET:** In the United Kingdom, a person is classified as NEET (Not in education, employment or training) if they are aged 16 to 24 years and are not participating in any form of education, employment, or training.
- **OECD:** The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development is an international organisation that aims to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity, and well-being. It seeks to establish evidence-based international standards and solutions to a range of social, economic and environmental challenges.
- **Online mentoring:** Programmes in which mentor and mentee communicate via online technology. This might include an initial face-to-face meeting, but the mentoring is done using the Internet.
- **One-to-one mentoring:** Programmes in which one mentor is working with one young person and in which matching typically takes place.
- **Peer mentoring:** Programmes in which older students' mentor younger students. These are typically students within the same school and the mentoring programme takes place within the school setting. Often, these are internally run schemes by the school monitored by an allocated staff member.
- **School-based mentoring:** Programmes that predominantly occur within the school, either as part of school, before or after school, but on school grounds.
- **Social capital:** Refers to the networks, relationships, and social connections that provide individuals access to resources, opportunities, and support.
- **Social Mobility:** The ability for individuals or groups to move upward in socioeconomic status, often through access to education, employment, and resources.
- **Soft Skills:** Interpersonal and transferable skills such as communication, leadership, empathy, and adaptability, which are critical for job readiness and career success.

- **Young people-Centred Approach:** A method that prioritises the needs, voices, and aspirations of young people in the design, implementation, and evaluation of mentoring programmes.

3) Best practices structure presentation

We have curated a series of practices that consistently appear from both practitioners and scientific studies. These practices show a common agreement in the field and represent the most effective strategies for quality youth mentoring in the UK context.

Each key standard is presented as follows:

- What the research tells us: a synthesis of findings from the literature review and interviews, highlighting why the practice is essential.
- Expected outcomes: an explanation of the benefits programmes can foresee by implementing the practice, supported by evidence from the literature and the field.
- Favourable Context: situational or environmental factors that enhance the relevance or applicability of the practice.
- In Practice: Insights from UK professionals, including illustrative examples demonstrating how the practice works in real-world settings.

4) Mentoring as Means to an End: A Functional Perspective

In their 2021 research paper, A. Cavell et al. argue that "mentoring relationships can serve both as a means to a targeted end and as a valued end unto itself". They created a functional typology that classifies mentoring into supportive, problem-focused, and transitional definitions (see Table 1 below for details).

A Functional Typology of Youth Mentoring Programs

	Mentoring Relationships as an End	*Mentoring Relationships as a Means*	
Type	Supportive	Problem-Focused	Transitional
Estimated length	Often one year or more	Less than a year	Dictated by the transition
Goals	Normative developmental achievements & milestones	Reductions in specific problems; improved health for specific groups	Successful transitions for specific groups
Putative change mechanisms	Safe, supportive, nurturing relationship	Shift in risk/protective factors specific to the problem or germane to the group	Shift in risk/protective factors specific to the group's transition