



Contextual Safeguarding

A 2020 update on the operational, strategic and conceptual framework

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Introduction

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families.

Contextual Safeguarding has been in development since 2011 to inform policy and practice responses to harm that young people experience in contexts and relationships beyond their families. Initially emerging from a three-year review of practice responses to cases of peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2017), the framework has been adapted to advance safeguarding responses to a range of extra-familial risks that compromise the safety and welfare of young people in school, public spaces and peer groups (Firmin, 2016).

Since its publication in 2016, the CS Framework has been the subject of testing via an online practice framework and in local authority test sites. Over this period a research team from the University of Bedfordshire has worked alongside practitioners to gradually understand the implicit value-base that informs the approach and what the framework requires from services and teams who use it.

This document builds on an initial briefing on the approach published in 2017, and outlines how the operational, strategic and conceptual framework of Contextual Safeguarding has been implemented, and advanced, from 2017-2020. In particular it:

1. Revisits the Contextual Safeguarding framework and its key features (domains, weighting and interplay)
2. Details the values that underpin the Contextual Safeguarding framework and the service/practice requirements it generates
3. Introduces how Contextual Safeguarding has been implemented at two levels
4. Shares resources/activities that have been designed and continue to be tested
5. Outlines plans for the Contextual Safeguarding programme 2020 – 2022

Progress since 2017

When the first Contextual Safeguarding briefing was published in 2017, the Contextual Safeguarding Framework was yet to be implemented across a children and families service system. Since the inclusion of the term in *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018*, there has been significant strategic and operational uptake of the approach in England, Wales and Scotland – uptake that has helped the research team understand, and articulate, the implications of the framework for practice.

An initial project to design an operational version of a Contextual Safeguarding system in our first pilot site, the London Borough of Hackney, resulted in the publication of a Contextual Safeguarding Implementation Toolkit in 2019¹. Nine new pilot sites launched in 2019 to test and advance the work produced from the Hackney project.² The Contextual Safeguarding practice network has grown from having 500 members in 2017 to over 7,000 members at the start of 2020. Members are applying and providing feedback on the practice and policy resources co-created in test sites. 19 local areas in England and Wales (10 of which are pilot

¹ Toolkit can be accessed via www.csnetwork.org.uk

² Bristol, Kent, Knowsley, Swansea, Wiltshire and London Boroughs: Barking and Dagenham, Ealing, Merton and Sutton.

sites) have formed a Local Area Implementation Group, where strategic leads reflect on the approach, support each other and direct the research team as to where further evidence or understanding is required. A further 19 areas in England and Wales have joined a Local Area Interest Network who are provided with virtual support from the Contextual Safeguarding team as they embark on the early stages of implementation. Two strategic visits were made to Scotland in 2019 to explore the relevance of the Contextual Safeguarding Framework in that policy and practice context. A core group of senior leaders has been established as a result, identifying opportunities for incorporating Contextual Safeguarding in Scotland in 2020.

In addition to our research in test sites, the Contextual Safeguarding research programme has grown to include studies into: the use of relocation as a response to extra-familial harm (The *Securing Safety* project); further testing of self-assessment toolkits for responding to harmful sexual behaviours in schools (*Beyond Referrals 2*), and; a range of projects that are developing contextual interventions as a response to extra-familial harm (*Youth Now* in Oldham and *The Peace Project* in Hounslow, for example). The Contextual Safeguarding team has published 16 peer-reviewed papers and book chapters on the thematic evidence emerging from this body of work since 2017, alongside briefings and resources to apply this knowledge in practice settings.

Contextual Safeguarding Framework

An extensive evidence base on extra-familial harm³ and adolescent development suggests that peer relationships, school and community contexts (both online and offline), as well as familial contexts, shape the welfare and safety of young people (Barter, et al., 2009; Brandon, et al., 2020; Catch 22, 2013; Firmin, 2017b; Hanson & Holmes, 2015; Hudeck, 2018; Lloyd, 2018; Lloyd, et al., 2020; Ringrose, et al., 2011; Smallbone, et al., 2013; Warr, 2002).

A review of nine cases of peer-on-peer abuse, affecting 145 young people, illustrated these dynamics and the inability of child protection practices to affect them (Firmin, 2017a). In order to engage with the contextual dynamics identified in these cases, professionals required a policy and practice framework that recognised a) the differential weight of influence that contexts had in shaping the behaviours of young people, and b) the impact that extra-familial settings could have on the ability of parents and carers to be protective.

Working with 11 local areas, findings from audit and case reviews evidenced the limitations of current child protection approaches (Firmin, et al., 2016). This work formed the basis of the Contextual Safeguarding (CS) framework (Figure 1). The framework comprised **four domains**. According to the CS Framework, a safeguarding and child protection system would be contextual if it:

1. was designed to identify, assess and intervene with the *social conditions* of abuse (i.e. targeted the nature of the contexts in which abuse occurred rather than just the individuals affected by it) (**TARGET**);

³ Including forms of child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, teenage relationship abuse, gang-affiliation, peer-on-peer sexual and serious youth violence that are not instigated by a young person's parents or wider family

2. drew extra-familial contexts into traditional child protection and broader child welfare and safeguarding processes (which were traditionally focused on families) as opposed to purely community safety and policing (**LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK**);
3. built partnerships with sectors and individuals who managed or had a reach into extra-familial settings where young people spent their time (such as those responsible for the management of schools, transport services, shopping centres, libraries, take-away shops) (**PARTNERSHIPS**), and;
4. measured its impact on the contexts where young people were vulnerable to abuse or harm (rather than just focusing on a change in the behaviour of individuals who continued to spend time in harmful spaces) (**OUTCOMES**).

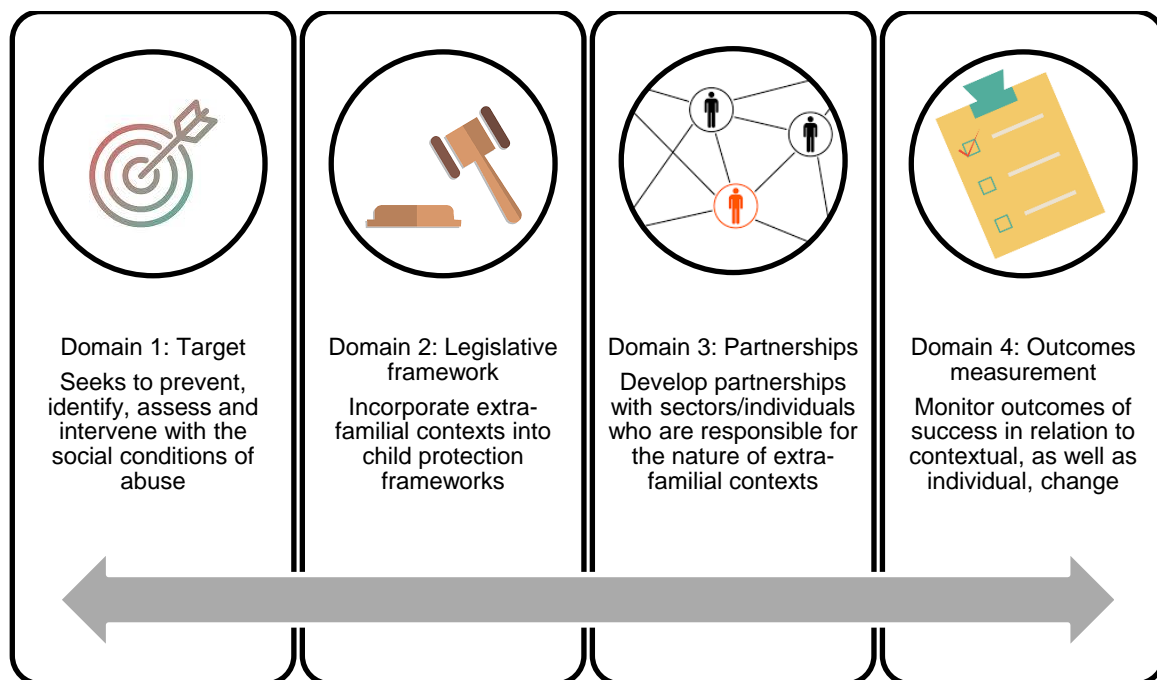


Figure 1 Contextual Safeguarding Framework

When applying these four domains of a CS Framework it is possible for services to recognise the *interplay* between contexts; and through *context weighting* identify the principle contextual factors that require attention and/or intervention.

- **Interplay** helps practitioners to understand the association between different relationships. For example, how might a young person’s experience of being targeted and groomed in a takeaway shop affect their relationship with their family? And in what ways might the relationships with peers in this context undermine parental capacity?
- **Context weighting** supports practitioners to determine which context is most in need of intervention. By determining the context in which a young person may be safest or most at risk of harm, practitioners can prioritise plans and interventions to target the context most in need. For example, rather than focussing exclusively on providing support to parents, with the aim of decreasing the risks a young person faces in a park, practitioners may identify the need to intervene in the park itself (Firmin, 2017c).

The four domains of Contextual Safeguarding, alongside ideas of context weighting and context interplay, provide the pillars for systemically changing the way in which services,

policymakers and practitioners consider, and respond to, factors that compromise the safety of young people in extra-familial settings.

Value-base and service requirements of a CS approach

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to extra-familial harm and not a model. In this sense, it is designed to be adapted to the different contexts and requirements of services employing it. However, as take-up of the CS Framework has increased so too has the need to articulate the values that underpin the approach, and the requirements such an approach makes of services and systems.

Contextual Safeguarding is built on three core ideas. Firstly, the belief that changing the nature of contexts where harm has occurred is possible – even over an extended period of time. In that sense, it is hopeful and requires those involved to adopt that same sense of hope. Secondly, Contextual Safeguarding is an anti-oppressive approach to practice. It is informed by the idea that inequality is both the cause and consequence of contextual harm. Not everyone experiences the same context in the same way – broader inequalities can mean that a location or school or peer environment which feels (or is) safe for one young person may be very unsafe for another. Likewise, opportunities that some young people may have to access safety may not be available to all. An approach to creating safe environments therefore, starts with the premise that the road to realising safety will vary for different young people and this must be attended to in the development of assessments and plans. Finally, and associated to the above, is a recognition that harm occurs in an interaction between individual choice and structural/environmental constraints. Therefore approaches that seek to change young people’s choices/behaviours without changing the contexts in which those choices are made are not aligned to a CS approach. Neither are approaches which intervene solely with contexts and do not engage with young people and communities as active agents who have a role to play in creating safety.

When the CS Framework is applied with these core values in mind, practitioners, teams and wider services are asked to consider:

1. Their ‘collective capacity to safeguard’ young people – in addition to a parent’s capacity to safeguard those in their care;
2. That safeguarding being ‘everybody’s business’ or ‘everyone’s responsibility’ means that a wide range of agencies, communities and individuals play an active role in creating safe spaces – in addition to the role that agencies may play in identifying harm and reporting/sharing information about that harm;
3. Young people’s significant relationships, which are considered as part of a welfare response, include young people’s friendship and associations with peers – in addition to the relationships they have with family members.

Two-levels of implementation

Implementing Contextual Safeguarding requires a transformative shift in the systems and approaches agencies use when responding to young people’s experiences of harm. As

practitioners have begun working to the CS Framework we have identified they have amended their practice at two levels (which we previously referred to as tiers).

Level one

The first level remains focussed on individual working with children and families. Professionals and organisations draw extra-familial contexts into their direct work with children and families. For example in some test sites, such as Knowsley and Hackney, when a young person is referred for support at the children's services front door, the location in which they were harmed is also recorded alongside their home address. In Wiltshire, during assessments, social workers consider ways that 'pull factors' including peer influence are undermining a parent's capacity to safeguard a young person, and what may need to happen by way of support. Interventions remain focused on the child and family but they are informed by an understanding of the way different contexts/relationships interact with a young person's decision-making. In Kent, training to staff supports them to consider how language needs to understand young people's experiences of risk and safety in context as opposed to individualising harm.

Level two

At level two professionals and broader organisations, develop practices, systems and structures for identifying, assessing and intervening with contexts and groups in which young people are at risk of significant harm. This is a radical shift in practice, requiring child protection professionals to not only acknowledge the relationship of contexts to individuals but actively take steps to change those contexts. For example, in Swansea, following multiple referrals for physical violence of young people in one area, the front door service set up a case file for the location itself and recorded details and case notes on the location case file as opposed to only individual children's files. In Bristol, professionals trialled a safeguarding assessment of a location where young people were at risk of robbery and exploitation, alongside support to individual young people affected by that harm. A core group has formed around the plan for the location, drawing together community safety, social work and youth work colleagues to deliver a unified approach. Multiple sites have also begun trialling peer group assessments and plans, using a peer group assessment framework.⁴

Each level facilitates and supports the other. Level 1 work gradually identifies contexts in need of attention through Level 2 work, and work undertaken at Level 2 informs the efficacy of, and wraps around, work at Level 1. Assessing progress to date at both levels we have found that all professionals can independently take steps to enact change at level one, whereas level two requires strategic sign-up and commitment for effective delivery.

⁴ See resources on page 11 for context assessment frameworks

Thresholds

A key question underpinning our work nationally has been developing an understanding of what level and type of social care support is offered to young people experiencing extra-familial harm. By reviewing cases of children referred into children's social care in sites across England and Wales we have considered the following questions: How many young people referred into children's social care are affected by extra-familial harm? Which services or levels of support do these young people receive? What are the key factors determining threshold decisions for these young people, for example: are parenting concerns the main driver for increasing the level of social work oversight in a case or the significance of the harm experienced by that young person? What language is used to describe young people's experiences of extra-familial harm?⁵

Findings suggest significant variation in how thresholds are applied to young people experiencing extra-familial harm, both within and across multi-agency partnerships. In some areas, young people appear to only be placed on Child Protection plans when there are concerns about parenting in addition to extra-familial harm. In other areas professionals predominantly use Child in Need plans where there are no concerns regarding parenting (but often significant concerns regarding extra-familial harm). Others are developing alternative safety plans for young people who experience extra-familial harm. The London Borough of Hackney was the first to develop 'statutory' equivalent context plans. For example, in a school where there were concerns about child sexual exploitation and drug use, the school participated in a school assessment led by a social worker. Following a 'context conference' with the school and chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer, a plan was developed for the school with social work oversight but with most elements of intervention owned by the school, the youth service and latterly local businesses.

The question of what level of support and oversight is required in cases of extra-familial harm continues to be a priority for the Contextual Safeguarding team and areas who are co-creating the approach with us. At this time, we do not advocate for a particular type of plan for young people affected by extra-familial harm. However, we are of the position that services need to ensure that there is oversight of young people at risk of significant harm regardless of whether the risk exists within or outside of their families. Testing has also taught us that areas who adopt a Contextual Safeguarding approach must critically examine how 'threshold' is applied to young people affected by extra-familial harm in their services – and what drives decision-making around the level of social work oversight in these cases. We have produced a tutorial for sites who wish to dip-sample cases and review decision-making in this way.⁶ The results will inform where and how a Contextual Safeguarding approach develops in that area.

⁵ See resources for a tutorial on conducting case reviews

⁶ All resource listed on page 11 below

Key resources and activities

Researchers in the Contextual Safeguarding team have captured efforts to develop work at both Level 1 and Level 2, and worked alongside practitioners to convert these activities into resources. All resources are published free on the Contextual Safeguarding Network and can be accessed by network members. All resources are being tested, refined and adapted to suit a range of local areas – both with, and without, the research team’s assistance.

Key resources and activities which exemplify Level 1 work include⁷:

- Front door services: Amendments to guidance used at the front door of children’s services to guide the recording of peer, school and neighbourhood factors relevant to the protection or risks faced by that young person
- Assessments: Prompts and guidance documents for considering ways to draw context into child and family assessments and AssetPlus youth justice assessments
- Safety mapping: and broader tools to support young people and families to talk about their experiences in community and school contexts
- Child protection conference: Guidance documents for drawing context into child protection conferences and strategy conversations
- Thresholds: Adaptations to thresholds used for decisions regarding children and families which make increased reference to contexts and extra-familial factors

Resources available to facilitate the design and testing of Level 2 CS work with peer groups, schools and public places, include:

- Assessment frameworks: Triangles and prompts for peers, schools and locations
- Context assessment methods: Guidance and documents for assessing peer groups, schools and locations such as surveys, observation logs and direct engagement tools to assist in building an understanding of a context in question
- Context threshold: Thresholds specifically for contexts and policy documents to identify contexts which might require a statutory social care response and oversight
- Meeting frameworks: Developing plans for changing environments in which young people are at risk of harm

Conclusion – Next Steps in 2020 - 2022

This briefing provides an update on what has been learnt since first testing the CS Framework in 2017. Specifically, it recaps features of the Contextual Safeguarding framework and introduces the values, practice requirements, levels of implementation and resources/activities that have developed when the framework has been put to the test.

This initial test period has reaffirmed that the CS Framework facilitates an approach to practice rather than produces a manual or a model: the activities, resources and wider approaches undertaken to realise the ambitions of the framework will reflect the local context. Testing will continue across 10 research sites until 2022 – enhanced by learning from a wider interest network of 25 areas who are adopting the approach outside of the

⁷ All resources listed on page 11 below

research programme; these tests will assist us in communicating what is shared across areas that adopt a CS approach, and where we see divergence.

The Contextual Safeguarding team at the University of Bedfordshire will use the learning from our 10 sites, wider area interest network and broader practice membership co-create new, or adapt existing, resources which aid the delivery of a CS approach. From 2020-2021 we will be engaging young people and parents in conversations about Contextual Safeguarding across test sites to inform the approach of sites who are embedding Contextual Safeguarding across their systems. We are also generating far more information about the nature of interventions developed in extra-familial settings, the interface of harm within and outside of families, approaches to family support and parental peer support in CS systems. Using impact case studies, we will report on how such work is enhancing responses to extra-familial harm in the years ahead – and identify implications for local, national and international policy and service development.

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Appendix A: Resources

For access to all Contextual Safeguarding resources **please visit:**

www.csnetwork.org.uk

Resource	Overview
Assessment triangles	Three assessment triangles for peers, schools and neighbourhoods based upon the child and family assessment triangle
Audit Process	Step-by-step guide to auditing service responses to peer-on-peer abuse
Beyond Referrals	Self-assessment audit toolkit for schools on harmful sexual behaviour
Case Review Tutorial	A tutorial video on how to conduct case reviews to understand threshold decisions
Child and Family Assessment guidance	The Assessment and Intervention Planning for Young People at Risk of Extra-Familial Harm: A Practice Guide was developed by Hackney's Children and Families Services to support practitioners consider extra-familial risk when they conduct a child and family assessment
Child Protection Conference	Guidance on bringing contextual practice into child protection conferences
Context Assessment toolkits	Three toolkits for assessing neighbourhood, schools and peer groups including assessment frameworks and methods
Context Conference guidance	Guidance on carrying out context conferences including Terms of Reference and Information Sharing protocol
Context Weighting	Overview and infographic on the process of context weighting
Interventions catalogue	Interventions catalogue with a range of example interventions for different contexts
Legal Framework	Briefing on the range of legal and regulatory tools guiding Contextual Safeguarding
Safety Mapping	Guidance and podcast on how to conduct safety mapping to help practitioners identify areas of risk and safety in their local neighbourhood
Thresholds	Two threshold documents - one includes changes to Hackney's traditional child and family threshold document with reference to extra-familial factors and a second threshold document developed specifically for contexts

All resources are designed to be adapted and modified for different area and service needs. If you use our resources and find them useful or suggest changes please let us know.



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