





# Contextual Safeguarding introduction to Case-Review using 'dip-sampling'



## 1. Introduction

Dip-sampling is a way of reviewing cases to find out particular questions about what happens in your system. The process described in this guide has been developed to support local areas as they apply Contextual Safeguarding to a local authority child protection system, and is a companion to the video. We use it to audit:

	<b>Threshold decisions about cases where there is harm outside the home</b>
	<b>Where cases of extra-familial harm 'sit' within a safeguarding system</b>
	<b>Whether there are differences in the treatment of young people according to categories like 'types of harm', 'age', 'ethnicity', 'gender' etc.</b>
	<b>The language used to describe extra-familial harm in case files</b>

To do a dip-sample of cases, you will need access to case-files and an understanding of Contextual Safeguarding.

## 2. Agreeing your focus

The first thing to decide is the focus of your dip-sample. What is your main question? For example, it could be: *“what decisions are made about cases of extra-familial harm in our MASH? Where are those cases sent to next?”* or *“what are the safeguarding issues for young people subject to section 47 processes where there is extra-familial harm?”*

No matter what your question is, and which aspect of your service you want to audit, the overarching question is likely to be something about how thresholds of risk/harm are used in your area. ‘Threshold’ in this context means how cases of extra-familial harm are treated in your system – i.e. when would a case ‘meet a threshold’ for a certain response to take place, when would it not, and why. There is no ‘right’ way and no national guidance on this, but it is important to know what the practice is in your area if you are going to implement a Contextual Safeguarding approach in your system.

We have found that there are four scenarios that drive how decisions about thresholds are usually made:

- When a child/young person faces significant extra-familial harm and there are also concerns about parenting
- When a child/young person faces significant extra-familial harm and there are no parenting concerns
- When a child/young person is ‘in need’ due to extra-familial harm and there are concerns about parenting
- When a child/young person is ‘in need’ due to extra-familial harm and there are no parenting concerns

The dip-sampling process will help you to understand what happens in your area when these different scenarios occur. Of course it’s possible to adapt these categories according to what you want to know and the area of the safeguarding system (i.e. front door, assessment etc.) that you are looking at.

Other examples of things that might influence threshold decisions are:

- Whether a young person is thought to be a ‘perpetrator’ or ‘victim’ of harm
- How ‘engaged’ (or ‘non-engaged’) a young person, their parents or others seem to be

When we do dip-sampling we are looking at the case notes to find out why threshold decisions are made in practice. We do this to be able to reflect on whether this is in line with your policy framework and if anything needs to change.

### 3. Identifying your ‘sample’

Next you need to choose your ‘sample’ - that is, the cases you will look at. Decide before you start about how you will define this. For example, “*all of the young people whose Child and Family Assessments were closed in November 2020*” or “*all of the young people whose Contact and Referral forms were closed in MASH in January 2018*”. Having a set group like this rather than choosing cases at random will mean that you can do another dip sample and compare the results for a different point in time – like after you have introduced a change in your system. Decide too which part of the case file you are going to ‘dip’ into – like only the Child and Family Assessment – and nothing else on the child’s case file, again to have consistency.

Next, you need to get the list of cases to look at. This involves getting a long list and then excluding or including names, according to whether they meet your criteria (age/types of harm etc). When you ask for the long list, be clear what information you need (i.e. all the CP cases closed in June 2022). You are likely to need to ask for names or ID numbers, along with information about their age, ethnicity and which category/categories of abuse or harm each young person was assigned – for example the DfE assessment categories.

Once you have this list you start to narrow it down to find the cases relevant for extra-familial harm. There is no perfect way of doing this, but the important thing is to be consistent, particularly if you are going to repeat this process at a different point in time. Here is an example of a process you could follow:

<b>1</b>	Keep a record of the total number of cases in the long list (so that you can later compare this figure with the final number of cases you dip-sample)
<b>2</b>	Delete all of the cases below the age you have chosen as your cut off. We used 12 years at time of contact (this is because, generally speaking, extra-familial harm affects those who are in adolescence)
<b>3</b>	<p>Decide which categories of harm/abuse to choose and then delete any records that are not associated with these categories (some children may have multiple categories). In the past we have chosen the following categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• drug - child</li> <li>• domestic violence - other</li> <li>• missing</li> <li>• CSE</li> <li>• trafficking</li> <li>• gangs</li> <li>• socially unacceptable behaviour</li> <li>• physical abuse - other</li> <li>• sexual abuse – other</li> </ul> <p>The rationale for choosing these cases was based on researcher and practitioner knowledge of the types of issues likely to be associated with extra-familial harm, but they are not set in stone and your knowledge of how categories are used in your area may lead you to include or exclude certain categories</p>
<b>4</b>	Next, go into each case file and confirm that it is a case of extra-familial harm. Again, this is not an exact process and sometimes a case may not seem to be relevant but as information emerges during assessment, this changes. You need to decide whether to include or exclude a case, but the important thing is to be consistent and to only look at the aspect of the case file that you’ve decided to focus on e.g., Child and Family assessments completed in May 2020 (apart from demographic information which can be sought from other parts of the database)
<b>5</b>	You will now have the final sample to ‘dip’ into. Keep a record of this number so that you can compare it to the original sample number – this could be included in any future comparison work that you do so that you can see whether there has been a significant difference in the number of cases of extra-familial harm. You may also want to keep a record of how many children are identified under the various categories of abuse/harm, so that these can be analysed and compared with a later dip-sample

**6** Finally, give each of the young people in the sample a new unique identifier and remove their names. You're ready to begin!

## 4. Reviewing cases

You will need a way of keeping a record of the information so that you can easily analyse it later.

Here is an example of a table you could use which could be adapted according to your particular focus and question:

Unique ID	Type of harm	Contact date	Age at time of contact	Gender	Ethnicity	DOB	Outcome	Referred to?	Reason for social care involvement (extract)	Reason for closure or progression (extract)

You then need to go into each of the relevant records and extract the information to put under these headings. The last four categories are most important for providing the relevant information to answer your questions:

**Outcome** – this refers to what happened at the close of assessment. If you are not looking at closure you might want to consider another point in time.

**Referred to?** – which service was the young person referred to, if any.

**Reason for social care involvement** – you can copy key parts of what is written here (rather than summarise). This is important information for understanding how thresholds are being applied in your area. If you were looking at a Child and Family assessments, you could record the reasons given for involvement at the start and any reasons that emerged during the assessment. Draw out any short descriptions of the harm and how both extra-familial and familial harm are described as reasons for social care involvement.

**Reason for closure/progression** – you can copy key parts of what is written here (rather than summarise), particularly if you are interested in analysing the language used.

As you fill in the ‘reasons for social care involvement’ and ‘reasons for closure’ think about what this information tells you. Think about the four scenarios below:

- Cases where there is significant extra-familial harm and also concerns about parenting
- Cases where there is child in need levels of extra-familial harm and also concerns about parenting
- Cases where there is significant extra-familial harm and no concerns about parenting
- Cases where this is child in need level of concern related to extra-familial harm and no concerns about parenting.

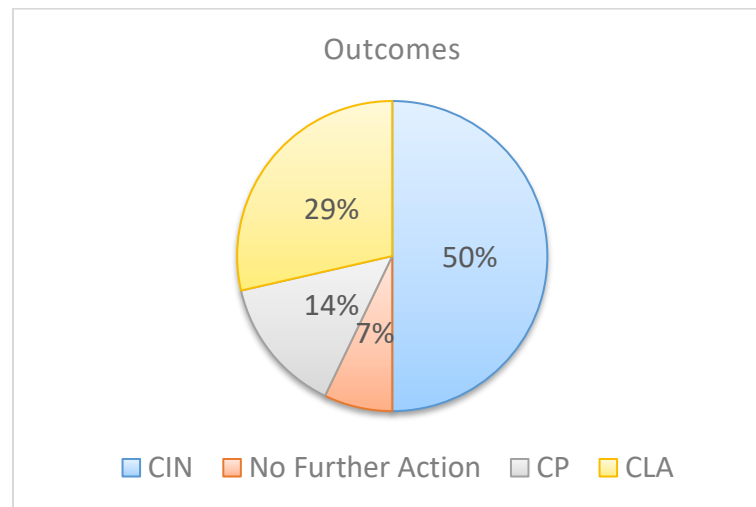
Ask: What happens in response to each of these scenarios? What sorts of decisions are made, and what services are offered in each one?

## 5. Analysis

Once you have completed the table for each of the cases it is time to analyse the information. What does the information tell you about how extra-familial harm is dealt with in your service area? Although all of the options for analysing the information that are listed below have their value, you may not have the time or resources to do all of them. Even if you focus only on one area, such as patterns around threshold decisions (no. 4), and learn something new about this to reflect on and respond to with your service, that would be really helpful.

Here are some of ways that you could analyse the information:

<p><b>Information about your sample</b></p>	<p>You could look at what percentage of young people in your sample experienced extra-familial harm compared with the overall sample size. You could also look at which categories of harm and abuse happened most at this stage (i.e. most young people in this group experienced CSE). This could lead into a discussion with colleagues about whether this reflects what you think happens in practice or whether it's different from what you would expect. If you have done a number of dip-sampling exercises using the same process, you could compare this information across, say, three instances and consider whether there are significant differences and why that might be</p>						
<p><b>Outcomes</b></p>	<p>You could look at what your information tells you about outcomes for young people who experience extra-familial harm. Are most cases going to early help? Are they given no further action or referred on? Is this what you would expect? If the information was hard to find out this also tells you something to feed back (see chart below)</p>						
<p><b>Types of harm and variations</b></p>	<p>You could look at the the types of harm that are experienced. You could then discuss this with your colleagues to discuss if this is what you would expect. Are only some types of harm being identified? Is it the case that certain types of harm are screened out?</p> <p>You could also look at outcomes for certain types of harm – for example are criminal exploitation cases much more likely to receive a 'no further action'? A chart might be a helpful way of displaying this information</p>						
<p><b>Threshold decisions</b></p>	<p>You could look at the reason for progression/closure.</p> <p>You might find it helpful to make a table which summaries information as follows:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="354 1098 1804 1170"> <thead> <tr> <th>Summary of harm</th> <th>Outcome</th> <th>Reason for closure/ progression</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Sexual assault at party</td> <td>Child in Need</td> <td>Concerns about parental boundaries</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Once you have done this you can ask yourself a series of relevant questions. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the information saying surrounding how decisions are made about what goes to Child Protection, Early Help or Child in Need services? Think about the 4 scenarios. Are threshold decisions based on level of harm or on whether there are parental concerns? Are there cases sitting at Child Protection level due to extra-familial harm or not? Is this what you would expect? What happens to cases of significant harm outside the home when there are no parental concerns dealt with?</li> <li>• Is there variance according to the type of harm, ethnicity, gender or age group? Are you seeing more cases progressed for particular groups of young people?</li> </ul> <p>When you present your findings, you might want to pull out quotes from the case files to show how practitioners describe their reasons for the threshold decisions they make</p>	Summary of harm	Outcome	Reason for closure/ progression	Sexual assault at party	Child in Need	Concerns about parental boundaries
Summary of harm	Outcome	Reason for closure/ progression					
Sexual assault at party	Child in Need	Concerns about parental boundaries					
<p><b>Language</b></p>	<p>You could look at the language used to understand what the practice culture is for talking about extra-familial harm. Do you see practitioners minimising the harm or a practice of describing it as if to imply young people are to blame for what is happening to them? You are doing this not to blame individual practitioners, but to look for patterns and cultures, so that these can be addressed.</p>						



Example outcomes chart

## Implications

The final stage is to reflect on what this new information tells you and what response is needed.

You might find it helpful to create a series of summaries of your findings, for example:

- *“The majority of our extra-familial harm cases are held at Child in Need”*
- *“Where there is extra-familial harm, the number of cases that progress are relatively low but this has increased over time”*
- *“We can see that there is a child welfare approach through language used”*

And also, a series of questions such as:

- Who should have oversight of extra-familial cases?
- Are we happy with where our cases are progressed to and the reasons given?

You will probably find it helpful to gather a group of colleagues - stakeholders, champions, managers, and practitioners - to reflect on these findings and agree any next steps in response to them.

## Conclusion

Although this guide is quite long, dip-sampling does not need to be a really long-winded thing to do. Remember you don't have to do all the things described here. Dip-sampling can be a very helpful way of learning about practice decisions and trends. You can read more about how we have used dip-sampling in the following paper:

Lloyd & Firmin (2019) No Further Action: Contextualising social care decisions for children victimised in extra-familial settings. *Youth Justice*. [No Further Action: Contextualising Social Care Decisions for Children Victimised in Extra-Familial Settings - Jenny Lloyd, Carlene Firmin, 2020 \(sagepub.com\)](https://www.youthjustice.org.uk/No-Further-Action-Contextualising-Social-Care-Decisions-for-Children-Victimised-in-Extra-Familial-Settings)

If you would like any further support or advice please get in touch. More information and resources about Contextual Safeguarding can be found at: <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/>