The individual and contextual characteristics of young people who sexually harm in groups

A briefing on the findings from a study in four London boroughs

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Contents

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

INTRODUCTION

This briefing presents the findings of a study into the contextual profiles of young people suspected of displaying harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) in groups and/or on their own. It builds upon an international literature review into group-based HSB to:

- explore the profiles of 49 young people who displayed HSB either in groups, on their own or in both contexts;
- identify any differences between these cohorts of young people, and;
- consider the implications for service design, delivery and commissioning.

In a period when peer-on-peer abuse, sexual violence in schools and responses to young people affected by sexual abuse are high on the public and policy agenda, this briefing provides a timely contribution towards deepening how HSB is understood and in addition, ensuring that the provision of services is sufficient for safeguarding young people. In this sense the primary purpose of this briefing is to inform the commissioning, design and delivery of responses to HSB. Additional research publications will be produced to further explore the findings of the study upon which this briefing has been built.

Definitions

The research team, and the four London boroughs who participated in this study, used Simon Hackett's continuum of sexual behaviours (2014) to define sexual behaviours which were harmful. Illustrated in Figure 1, young people who displayed behaviours that could be defined as problematic, inappropriate, abusive and violent were all included in the definition of HSB used in this study.
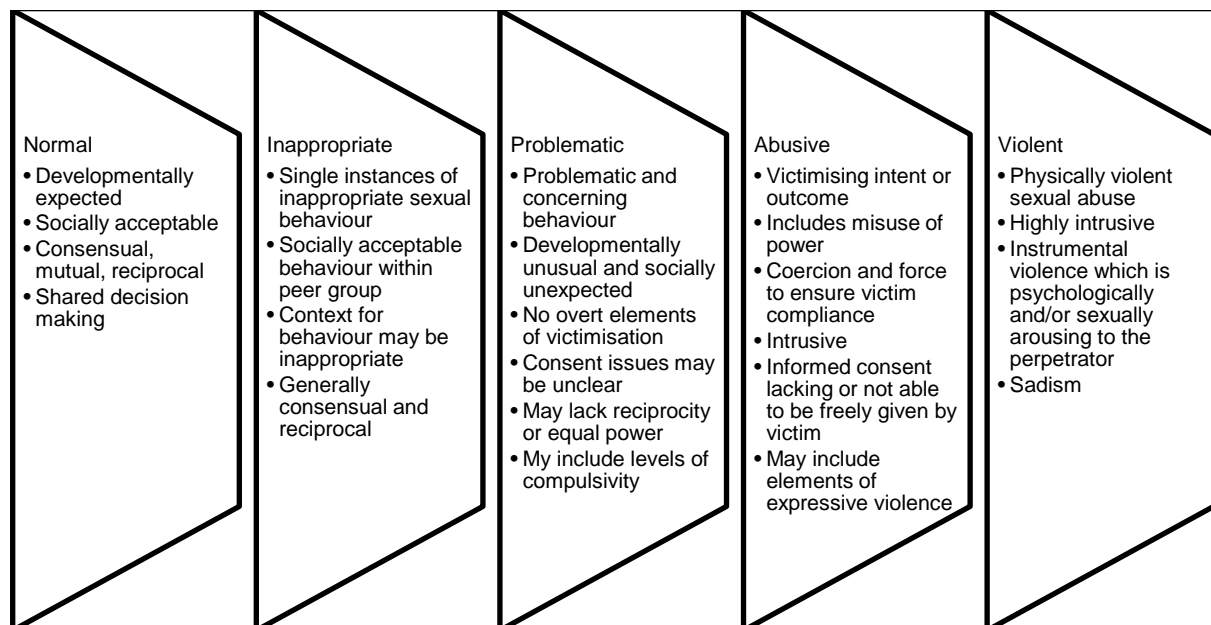
Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
• Developmentally expected • Socially acceptable • Consensual, mutual, reciprocal • Shared decision making	• Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour • Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group • Context for behaviour may be inappropriate • Generally consensual and reciprocal	• Problematic and concerning behaviour • Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected • No overt elements of victimisation • Consent issues may be unclear • May lack reciprocity or equal power • My include levels of compulsivity	• Victimising intent or outcome • Includes misuse of power • Coercion and force to ensure victim compliance • Intrusive • Informed consent lacking or not able to be freely given by victim • May include elements of expressive violence	• Physically violent sexual abuse • Highly intrusive • Instrumental violence which is psychologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator • Sadism

Figure 1 Hackett Continuum of Sexual Behaviours (Hackett 2011:122)

By 'young people', this study is focused on individuals aged 10-17 years old. The young people included therefore were above the minimum age of criminal responsibility and defined as children according to legislation in England and Wales.

A group is defined as two or more people, who act together, and/or in front of one another, and/or with a common and shared purpose, in the commissioning of some form of HSB.

STUDY BACKGROUND

Since 2013 the University of Bedfordshire, as part of the MsUnderstood Partnership and latterly the Contextual Safeguarding programme, has been supporting local multi-agency partnerships to develop, and co-create, responses to peer-on-peer abuse.[1] Following a three-year action research project the university published a report and resources that they developed with 11 local multi-agency safeguarding partnerships (referred to as MSU sites in this briefing) to engage with the contextual dynamics of this issue (Firmin et al., 2016) – which can be accessed here.

This work with MSU sites produced a learning point and practical tool that were both relevant to the design of responses to HSB. Firstly, the work identified that nationally, and in London specifically, there was an evidenced need for services that could respond to young people who were suspected of sexually harming in groups but were not subject to criminal justice processes. Such provision needed to identify ways of engaging with, or impacting the behaviour of, young people on a non-statutory basis, and respond to the group-dynamics of the behaviours that were being displayed. Building on this learning point, in one MSU site the research team co-created a framework with practitioners to use during meetings where practitioners discussed young people who were thought to be displaying HSB. The framework could be used as a tool to guide and record discussions at meetings and ensure that practitioners explored the contextual, as well as familial and individual factors associated to a young person's behaviour. In consultation with Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and a number of London local authorities, it was agreed that there was an opportunity to use this practice tool and further explore the learning point on responses to group-based HSB that had emerged during site work. To address the identified service gap more information was required about the profile of young people who were sexually harming in groups and the vulnerability and risk factors that interventions may need to address in order to increase protection and reduce harm. The University of Bedfordshire therefore designed a study (as outlined in the methodology section of this briefing) that used the aforementioned contextual HSB meeting framework to collect information: on the profiles of young people displaying HSB in four London boroughs; the current service response to these young people (and the contexts associated to their behaviours), and; any challenges faced by practitioners.

Prior to embarking on this proposed study, the research team conducted an international literature review to identify what was already known about young people who sexually harm in groups and the implications of this for service development.

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[1] Including young people who sexually harm peers, teenage relationship abuse, peer-on-peer sexual exploitation and serious youth violence amongst other forms of peer-victimisation

Harmful sexual behaviour, group offending and group intervention – a summary of the literature

As outlined above, this study has been conducted in the light of a literature review into group-based HSB amongst young people (Latchford et al., 2016). The full review can be accessed here. In summary, a synthesis of literature on HSB, group offending and group intervention found that there is very limited evidence on the profile and needs of young people who sexually harm other children and young people in groups. Of the evidence that was available is the review was able to conclude that:

- Co-offending (in general) peaks during adolescence.

- The majority of HSB studies that have provided findings on group offending are focused on the behaviours of young men. In one study that considered the role of young women in HSB cases, young men were involved alongside them on 95% of identified occasions.

- Young people who display HSB against similar age peers have been reported to have low levels of psychiatric problems compared to young people who sexually harm younger children. Where group-based HSB is identified it largely located with the former cohort

- Young people who display HSB in groups have a range of familial backgrounds and experiences. There is little that is consistent about the profiles of their families.

- Of young people who sexually harm, those who do so in groups have less engagement in formal education than their peers and have experience elevated levels of bullying and harassment at school compared to those who have not sexually harmed peers.

- Some studies have found that those who sexually 'offend' in groups have moderate/poor level of contact with peers and have a higher susceptibility to peer influences. In this regard, they may engage in anti-social behaviour to sustain friendships should this be the social norms of the groups to whom they are connected.

- Other studies have stated that those who sexually harm in groups are less socially isolated than those who do so alone.

- Groups who sexually harm peers appear to form spontaneously, and the sexually abusive behaviours in which they are engaged often occur during opportunistic situations. Group-based HSB appears to involve a greater degree of physical violence and humiliation then sole-perpetrated acts. It also often occurs in public spaces or in one of the homes of the young people involved.

- Group-based HSB is often motivated by a desire for status and/or belonging to a group or adherence to group norms. The anonymity that individuals gain from being part of the group and the influence of leaders within a group are also contributory factors.

This synthesis of the literature suggests potential differences between young people who sexually harm alone and those who do so in groups – however the evidence base is limited and the implications for practice responses require greater consideration. This study sought to build upon the conclusions drawn by this rapid evidence assessment in order to provide greater guidance for those wishing to prevent, assess and respond to young people who sexually harm in groups.

METHODOLOGY

In this study practitioners in four local authorities (sites) used the HSB contextual meetings framework developed by the MsUnderstood partnership (Appendix A) to record information about young people where:

1. There were concerns about young people displaying HSB – both allegations and proven offences; and
2. A meeting was being held to discuss these concerns and agree a plan of action to develop a response

Forty-nine completed assessment frameworks were submitted across the four sites as outlined in Table 1 and were subjected to qualitative analysis:

Site	Number of frameworks
A	8
B	14
C	4
D	23

Table 1 Number of frameworks by site

Practitioners in each participating site were responsible for completing the assessment frameworks. Each site identified a lead professional – either based within social care or the youth offending service – who would coordinate the completion of the frameworks and submit them to the research team. A briefing session was held for lead professionals in advance of the data collection period to explain the assessment framework and answer any questions. These lead professionals coordinated the meetings that took place for each young person, and were responsible for completing the framework or reviewing frameworks completed by others, drawing upon information provided from a wider network of practitioners during HSB meetings to do so. Frameworks were initially completed during meetings with further information added following the meeting where necessary. The lead professional quality assured and anonymised each framework before submitting it to the research team.

Each submitted framework was classified according to whether the young person was sexually harming others alone, in a group, or both alone and in a group.

Following classification each framework was coded (using NVivo) to identify themes related to: the nature of the behaviours being displayed in the referral; the vulnerability, risk, resilience and strength factors associated to the referral, and; the actions taken in response to identified concerns (details of the coding framework can be found in Appendix B).

Definition and parameters for inclusion

As noted in the introduction, Simon Hackett's continuum of sexual behaviours was used by practitioners in all sites to identify referrals for HSB meetings. Completed frameworks could only be used in this study if the behaviour of concern fit within these definitional parameters and featured a young person aged 10-17 who was suspected of sexually harming children or other young people. Each framework concerned one young person and was generated from a HSB meeting held to discuss that young person between September and December 2016.

Sample submitted

Of the 49 frameworks submitted to the study:

- 24 were concerned with young people who were only displaying HSB on their own
- 25 were concerned with young people who displayed HSB in groups. 10 of these young people were also doing so on their own.

The identification of young people who sexually harmed others in both groups and on their own produced an unanticipated third cohort in the study. While a subset of those who sexually harmed in groups, this cohort appeared to have some distinct features (which will be presented in the findings) and therefore at times need to also be considered as a distinct cohort.

In 21 cases the framework had been completed following one identified incident of HSB. In the remaining frameworks young people were alleged to have been involved in a series of HSB incidents. All young people featured in the sample were young men.

Practitioner de-brief

Once all frameworks had been submitted to the research team, a de-brief session was held to bring together the lead professionals from each site. During this session professionals discussed what they had learnt from completing the assessment frameworks and any challenges that they faced in doing so. Researchers also provided feedback on the ways in which the assessment frameworks had been completed. Information collected at the de-brief session informed the approach taken to analysis, helped to identify limitations in the study and led to the research team publishing more information and advice for practitioners on the approach to completing the framework via an online tutorial.

Approach to analysis

Frameworks were analysed to identify the behaviours and characteristics of young people who displayed HSB, the nature of the contexts to which they were associated (homes, peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods), and the type of approaches being taken within local areas to respond to the identified concerns. The assessment framework was structured to record information in this order. However, it was not always completed in accordance with the intended structure. For example individual risks (such as a young person not attending education) were sometimes recorded as being contextual (such as non-attendance being about the school environment rather than an individual's behaviour). Furthermore, information on the nature of the response to identified risk was sometimes recorded in information about different contexts etc. (please see limitations section for further information). These errors meant that additional analysis was required to ensure that all information – regardless of where it was logged on the framework – was appropriately coded. Frameworks were also analysed to compare young people who sexually harmed in groups, those who only did so alone and those for who both was true. The full coding framework used to analyse the assessment frameworks is listed in Appendix B.

Ethics

This study was granted ethical approval via a two-stage process at the University of Bedfordshire. Local research committees in three of the participating sites accepted the recommendations and decision made by the university process. In the remaining site an additional ethics application was made and approved via the local authority research ethics committee. Key ethical matters that have been considered in the planning, delivery and dissemination of this study include:

1. **Anonymity and confidentiality**: Lead professionals ensured that completed assessment frameworks were anonymised prior to submission to the research team. Lead professionals provided a code for each framework and held an internal record of these during the study. All sites have been anonymised in this briefing and their details will not be published in any document that is created to disseminate the findings of the study. Some sites have shared with colleagues in other local authorities that they are using the HSB framework designed for this study. However, some sites are using this tool who did not participate in the research, and some who participated do not always use the tool, ensuring that site participant anonymity is still protected

2. **Consent:** As researchers were accessing anonymised frameworks and ensuring no other identifiable information about the young people featured in them, consent was sought from professionals who managed the cases and not the young people who featured within them. Consent was provided by the lead professional submitting the template and the case worker with whom they may have worked with to gather information. Signed consent forms were submitted to the research team and the completed frameworks also featured the signature of the lead professional

3. **Data protection, security and storage**: All anonymised frameworks submitted to the research team were password protected and stored in an online folder on the university ICT system, to which only the research team had access. The research team will have destroyed all frameworks received within 12 months of the publication of this briefing. As information provided was fully anonymised and shared for the purposes of improving the safeguarding response to young people, both the sites and the research team ensured that the study was conducted in-line with data protection.
4. **Presentation of the data**: The information collected represents 49 cases being managed by four multi-agency safeguarding partnerships in London. It is always important to note that this will not necessarily represent the wider London or national caseload of HSB referrals.

Limitations

The findings of this study have significant implications for both how HSB amongst young people are understood and the development of practice interventions. It is important, however, to acknowledge limitations of the study and the extent to which conclusions can be drawn in order to ensure that the findings are put to best use. As noted above, the study collected information on 49 referrals for HSB within four London local authorities. This sample was collected in an opportune way (they were young people discussed during the four month data collection period) rather than one that sought to be representative of the wider caseload in London or nationally. As a result, there are no young women in the sample for example. In addition, the contextual assessment framework is a new tool that has been developed in partnership with practitioners and continues to be piloted in different parts of the country. Professionals and the research team continue to explore and learn about the potential for the framework; and frameworks submitted to the study varied in terms of the quality and quantity of information recorded on them. It is possible, therefore, that not all of the information related to any given case was recorded in the submitted framework – in essence the research team could only work with the information that they were given. Furthermore, professionals could only record information on frameworks to which they were privy. Finally, the study was originally intended to compare the profiles of young people who displayed HSB in groups and those who did so alone. Through analysis a third cohort emerged who displayed HSB both in groups and alone. As the study was not designed to explore a comparison with this third cohort it was not always possible to compare them as a discrete group. However, where findings emerged that appeared distinct for this cohort they have been reported.

The research team took two approaches to managing and mitigating the limitations outlined above. Firstly, the findings themselves are presented in the context of an international literature review into group-based HSB that was conducted to inform this study (Latchford et al., 2016). As a result, they will not be considered in isolation but instead with reference to the wider body of evidence available on this subject-matter. Secondly, reflections from the de-brief session with lead professionals assisted the research team in identifying potential gaps in the data provided in completed frameworks, and presented an opportunity to gather reflections on the

nature of the issue in question and the ability of local partners to develop a response. These reflections will be drawn upon when presenting the data collected via the templates – noting both where there may be gaps in the data available, and where the information recorded reflects a significant concern or question held by the professionals who participated in the study.

FINDINGS

Within the 49 assessment frameworks analysed by the research team there were clear individual, familial and contextual differences between young people who sexually harmed in groups, those who did so only alone, and those who harmed in both groups and alone, as well characteristics that were shared across these cohorts. The nature of the behaviours also differed between these different cohorts of young people, as did the approaches that were available to respond to these distinct needs and experiences. The section of the briefing provides a detailed account of the cohort profiles and their behaviours. By way of an overview:

> Cohort 1: Young people who only sexually harmed on their own were recorded as doing so against younger children, siblings and relatives as well as same aged peers. They appeared more likely to experience social isolation than young people who only-or-also sexually harmed others in groups, most had an identified learning need or disability and a number struggled with their social skills. In general, the families of young people who only sexually harmed alone were more vulnerable than those of young people who did so in groups.

> Cohort 2: Comparatively, young people who only sexually harmed in groups generally did so against similar age peers and, compared to those who only harmed others on their own, they were living in relatively safe family environments. While a few were socially isolated, young people who sexually harmed peers alongside others were observed to have friendships with young people who also displayed HSB or held problematic attitudes towards women and girls, consent and relationships.

> Cohort 3: Young people who sexually harmed others in both groups and on their own emerged as a third distinct third cohort who was in some respects the most vulnerable group of the sample studied, and seemed to present the greatest risk to others. While there were only 10 of these young people in the study, and therefore statistical significance cannot be explored, their profile as a group warrants discrete attention in this briefing and further exploration in future research. Most of these young people had used violence before. They were more likely to threaten, coerce or blackmail those they had harmed compared to others featured in the study. All of these young people were living in families where they had been exposed to, or experienced, physical and emotional abuse (and in one case sexual abuse) – whereas experiences of familial abuse only featured for some (and not all) young people who only sexually harmed in groups or only on their own.

The following sub-sections detail the similarities and differences between these three cohorts, before moving on to consider the implications for assessment, intervention and the commissioning of services. Collectively they: a) highlight the need for an

increased understanding of the differences between young people who sexually harm in groups, those who do so on their own, and those who do both, and; b) demonstrate the lack of services/interventions that are in place to address the peer, school and community factors that are particularly associated to group-based HSB.

Nature of behaviours

Differences and similarities emerged across the three cohorts in relation to the nature of the HSB they displayed. HSB tended to be targeted at children and young people of different ages, and the relationship between the young person who displayed the HSB and those they targeted also differed by cohort. The ways in which school, peer and community contexts were associated to HSB differed across cohorts as did other factors that characterised the HSB incidents that were of concern.

Target of the harmful behaviours

In keeping with the message from international literature, of the 25 frameworks where it was a feature,[2] group-based behaviour all involved the abuse of similar-age peers (within three years age gap), rather than younger children. This was different to incidents where young people only sexually harmed on their own. Of these 24 cases nine involved the abuse of younger children (under the age of 10), 12 the abuse of peers and in the remainder the ages of those involved were unspecified.

Relationships between young people involved in cases also differed. Six of the eight referrals that involved the abuse of a sibling featured young people who only sexually harmed alone - the other two featured young people who harmed alone as well as in groups (and harmed siblings when they were on their own). Similar patterns emerged in cases of abuse against partners (n=6). Four of these referrals were concerned with young people who were always abusive alone and the other two featured those who abused others on their own as well as in groups.

Contexts associated to the harmful behaviours

Concerns about peer group and public space contexts were recorded far more in assessment frameworks for young people who sexually harmed, at least in part, in groups. All of the assaults that occurred within, and were in some way associated to, the nature of young people's local areas/neighbourhoods (n=9) involved groups rather than young people acting on their own. While a further four frameworks involved young people sexually harming others in public spaces on their own, in these cases the location of the incidents appeared random, opportunistic and their nature was largely unconnected to young people's patterns of socialisation. Of the 25 frameworks that featured group-based behaviours: 19 involved a peer audience (compared to 3 of the sole cases); peers were used to recruit others into abusive behaviours in 8 cases (compared to one of the sole cases); and in 11 cases there

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[2] Including the 10 where young people also displayed harmful sexual behaviour on their own

was evidence that a young person's peers were normalising their harmful behaviour (compared to evidence in one framework for a sole case).

Where contextual dynamics of the behaviour appeared relatively equal across sole and group cases was in relation to schools. Eight of the frameworks completed for young people who only harmed others on their own, and nine of those submitted for young people who sexually harmed in groups (of which three were both group and sole), involved HSB within schools.

Behaviour characteristics of the HSB incidents

Beyond contextual dynamics, there were a number of behavioural characteristics that were a feature of the HSB incidents recorded in 'sole', 'group' and 'both' frameworks that didn't feature in the majority of frameworks but were of note across cohorts nonetheless – as detailed in Table 2.

Behaviour characteristic during incident/s	Sole (=24)	Group (=15)	Both (=10)
Gang-associated	2	2	2
Image-sharing	3	2	4
Problematic online behaviours	4	4	3
Behaviour at 'parties'	3	3	1

Table 2 Behavioural characteristics of incidents featured across frameworks

In addition, blackmail was used by young people who only sexually harmed in both groups and on their own to threaten and coerce those they abused. This was identified in six (out of ten) of these frameworks. As will be seen throughout this briefing, information recorded in the frameworks suggested that those who harmed in both groups and own their own presented with some of the most violent behaviours in the sample, were best able to control others and were often leaders amongst their peer groups. Given this wider profile it is not that surprising that blackmail featured within the behaviours of this cohort.

Repeat HSB incidents

For a number of young people, across all three cohorts, the incident being discussed at professional meetings was not the first time that practitioners had been alerted to concerns related to HSB. In 21 of the 49 cases, young people were considered to be sexually harming other children and young people on an on-going basis. 12 of these young people had 'no-further-action' criminal justice decisions for sexual offences in their histories also implying that the behaviours in question were not isolated incidents.

Vulnerabilities and risks

Individual, familial and broader environmental (peer, school and neighbourhood) vulnerabilities and risks associated with HSB were recorded on each framework. Vulnerabilities were defined as pre-existing factors. These included characteristics such as: being in care or having a learning disability, as they related to individuals;

fractured relationships as they related to families; or having limited access to positive activities as they related to neighbourhoods and other external contexts. Risks were defined as issues that were directly related to the HSB incident/s of concern. This includes: individuals holding harmful attitudes towards women and girls or having a history of violence; or families where young people had been exposed to sexual activity. While data on schools and neighbourhood factors were less well recorded within templates the finding in all categories were useful. For information on familial, peer and individual characteristics the available information illuminated important differences and similarities between the three cohorts. For the most part these will be discussed with reference to young people who only harmed alone and those who harmed, at least in part, in groups. However, where they are distinct differences between those who harmed in groups and alone and those who harmed only in groups, these will be extracted.

Individual factors

Of the 24 frameworks concerned with young people who only displayed HSB on their own, 21 recorded that the individual had a learning difficulty or disability. This was the most consistently identified vulnerability for this group of young people. Furthermore, over half (n=13) were also recorded as having poor social skills (compared to only three who sexually harmed, at least in part, in groups) and a similar number (n=14) had been described as having a low self-esteem.

Overall, young people who had displayed HSB, at least in part, in groups had fewer recorded vulnerabilities than those who were only doing so on their own. However, where vulnerabilities were recorded there were some that were only documented for this cohort. Five had been coerced into sexually abusive behaviour (this was not recorded for any young people who only acted alone). Seven were considered to have followed the lead of others (compared to two young people who only sexually harmed alone). Three were also considered to have been sexually abused in extra-familial settings – this wasn't an experience recorded for any young people who only sexually harmed alone.

There were other vulnerabilities identified for some young people across the 49 frameworks that were not differentiated by cohort. Thirteen had been excluded from school (seven who harmed alone and 6 who harmed, at least in part, in groups). Nine were recorded as being gang-associated, four who harmed peers in groups and five who did so alone. Sixteen had been reported missing from home – 10 who harmed in groups and six who did so alone. There was also an identified overlap between victimisation and perpetration in eight frameworks – five of whom related to young people who had sexually harmed in groups.

The risks associated to young people featured in the frameworks also differed when those who harmed alone and those who did so in groups were compared. Very few risks were consistently identified across those young people who sexually harmed peers in groups. Four had identified attachments to high-crime areas and were involved in violence in this context – a feature not found in any frameworks for young people who only sexually harmed alone. Nine also had a history of wider offending (such as robbery and anti-social behaviour) – compared to one young person who only sexually harmed alone. The most consistently identified risk factor for those who sexually harmed in groups was that they demonstrated harmful attitudes towards

women and girls – 17 frameworks recorded this (including eight who both harmed alone and in groups). However, harmful attitudes were also displayed by 15 young people who only sexually harmed alone and were therefore not a risk factor solely associated with young people who displayed HSB in groups.

Comparatively there were a number of individual risks factors identified amongst young people who sexually harmed alone that were not recorded in the frameworks of those who only harmed in groups. Nine described these young people as having limited emotional intelligence. Four were known to have used weapons (one of whom also sexually harmed in groups as well as on their own). Ten engaged in problematic behaviours online (such as viewing inappropriate or illegal content), compared to two who only ever sexually harmed in groups. Other risks factors were only identified in a small number of frameworks – but were more strongly associated to those who harmed alone: two had displayed cruelty to animals; four displayed controlling behaviours; and three had displayed HSB in earlier childhood (none of these factors were identified in the frameworks of young people who harmed only when in a group).

There were some risk factors that appeared only pertinent to young people who sexually harmed others both in groups and on their own. While 26 of all 49 frameworks recorded that the young person had displayed violent behaviours in the past, this was true for nine of the ten young people who harmed peers in both groups and alone (compared to 10 of the 24 who only harmed alone and 7 of the 15 who only harmed in groups). Furthermore, close to half (n=4) of the 10 who sexually harmed on their own as well as in groups were identified as recruiting peers into abusive behaviours – compared to one of the 15 who only harmed in groups and none of the young people who only harmed on their own.

The differences between the individual risk and vulnerability factors recorded for young people who sexually harmed in groups, on their own or both suggests the importance of identifying and understanding wider contextual factors when conducting assessments. Risks and vulnerabilities of those who harmed in groups appeared more strongly associated to their relationship with their peers and local neighbourhood whereas those who only harmed alone appeared to have more personality or individual factors that informed their behaviours. These initial findings highlight the importance of framing risk and vulnerability factors in relation to the homes, peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods in which young people spend their time – as this briefing will now develop.

Familial factors

Vulnerabilities within young people's families were more pronounced for those young people who sexually harmed on their own – and especially for those harmed both alone and in groups. The families of young people who only displayed HSB in groups had less consistently identified vulnerabilities.

Across the whole cohort of 49 frameworks, the most readily identified vulnerabilities were: abuse within families (n=22); exposure to domestic abuse between parents and carers (n=22), and; challenges in controlling or managing young people's behaviours (n=21).

All ten of the young people who harmed young people both on their own and in groups were living in families where they had experienced physical and/or emotional abuse - in one case sexual abuse was also suspected. This is compared to just under half of those who only sexually harmed in groups (7 of 15) and just over half of those who only sexually harmed others on their own (14 of 24). Eight of the ten young people who sexually harmed both alone and in groups were also living in families where others (largely siblings) had engaged in HSB or where they had witnessed sexual activity or sexualised materials at home. This was rarely recorded for young people who only sexually harmed alone (n=1) and not at all for those who only sexually harmed in groups. It is also notable that the three young people who were living with siblings where there were concerns regarding child sexual exploitation were all thought to be displaying HSB both on their own and in groups.

Other familial vulnerabilities were recorded within some of the 49 frameworks and, although in small numbers, were more consistently identified for young people who sexually harmed alone, at least in part, than those who harmed in groups. Five young people had assaulted their parents (all of whom harmed others on their own, and two of which also harmed in groups). Eight young people who sexually harmed others, at least in part, on their own were living in families where they were exposed to other forms of criminality – compared to one who only sexually harmed in groups. Nine young people were rejected by parents and eight were living in homes where parents were absent – all of these young people sexually harmed, at least in part, on their own and half also sexually harmed in groups. Comparatively there were no familial vulnerabilities that were identified for young people who only sexually harmed in groups more readily than for those who did so alone.

Risks within families were far less pronounced than the familial vulnerabilities recorded on the 49 assessment frameworks. While young people were living in families where previous experiences made them vulnerable to HSB, active risks that were directly associated with the incidents of concern were less common. Of the risks that were identified, a harmful attitude amongst parents and carers was the most common issue. Of the 49 featured families, 17 blamed the young person who had been abused by their child for what had happened. Eleven of the 49 families also continued to struggle with setting boundaries for young people after they sexually harmed another young person. This issue presented on-going concerns for practitioners who were attempting to disrupt any further escalation in the behaviour of these young people, as often those families were not in support of interventions that were offered.

Peer factors

Risks and vulnerabilities within young people's peer groups were more pronounced for young people who were displaying HSB, at least in part, in groups. For those who were only sexually harming others on their own, social isolation was the most consistently identified vulnerability – recorded for 10 of the 24 for whom frameworks were completed (comparatively this was recorded as an issue for four young people who only sexually harmed in groups and two who did both).

For young people who only displayed HSB in groups the dynamics of peer relationships were more consistently associated with the incidents that had occurred. Thirteen of the 15 young people who only sexually harmed others in groups had

peers who displayed harmful attitudes towards women and girls – this was also an issue for a further five of the 10 who both harmed on their own and in groups. As a result, 18 out of the 24 young people who sexually harmed, at least in part, in groups, had peers who displayed harmful attitudes compared to seven of the 25 young people who only sexually harmed others on their own. Eighteen of the 24 frameworks that recorded group-based HSB also featured peers who were thought to have engaged in repeat incidents of HSB. Comparatively this dynamic was identified for four of the 25 frameworks produced for young people who only sexually harmed alone. Finally, 11 of the 25 young people who displayed HSB in groups had peer relationships in which violence was a feature – compared to one young person who only displayed HSB on his own.

Bullying amongst peers and peer-involvement in criminality were factors recorded in the frameworks for young people who sexually harmed in groups, on their own and both (as displayed in Table 3), demonstrating links between HSB and other forms of problematic peer and adolescent behaviour. Young people who sexually harmed others both in groups and on their own, and many who only harmed in groups, engaged in the bullying of others whereas those who only sexually harmed others alone were bullied by peers.

	Group only (n=14)	Sole only (n=25)	Both (n=10)
Bullying others	7	0	5
Bullied by others	6[3]	11	1
Peer criminality	9	8	4

Table 3 Peer relationships by case type

School and neighbourhood factors

Fewer frameworks recorded risks or vulnerabilities associated to school and neighbourhood contexts. During the de-brief with practitioners who completed the frameworks it emerged that further support, guidance and training were required to clearly recognise and record risks associated to these contexts. As noted in the limitations section of this briefing many frameworks recorded information about individual factors, such as a young person's attendance at school, as if it were a school-related contextual factor. As a result, practitioners did not always sufficiently provide information on the nature of the school or neighbourhood environments, and their association to abusive incidents, on the submitted frameworks, reducing the usefulness of any quantitative findings produced by the analysis.

However, some thematic concerns did emerge (when recorded) and while these can't be helpfully associated to cohorts (due to gaps in the data) they were worthy of note. Where practitioners did record contextual information, important risk and vulnerability factors associated to HSB were identified which included:

Schools

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[3] Five of the young people who sexually harmed in groups were recorded as being bullied and bullying others

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

- Poor quality or lack of sex and relationships education within schools (in which a young person had sexually harmed a peer or formed abusive peer relationships)
- Problematic bullying behaviours amongst young people that were unaddressed or insufficiently managed by school staff
- Youth produced sexual imagery being shared, without consent and sometimes as a result of coercion, amongst the student body
- HSB being displayed by a number of students within the school (beyond the young person for whom the framework had been produced)
- Wider exposure to violence, victimisation or criminality within the school environment – particularly within alternative education provisions, including pupil referral units
- Identified recruitment into exploitative networks and abusive peer groups within particular year groups in schools

Neighbourhoods

- 'Rat-runs' and hidden spaces within large housing estates in which violence, HSB and criminality could occur outside the view of professionals
- Threats to a young person's safety within the community – including association to street-based gangs who posed a risk to the safety of young people should they disassociate from harmful peer networks
- Lack of positive activities or safe spaces in the local neighbourhood/community through which to engage young people in diversionary activities
- Identified issues related to child sexual exploitation and other forms of sexual violence within the local community through which HSB had been normalised

In general, the above contextual dynamics were more readily identified for young people who sexually harmed peers, at least in part, in groups than those who did so only on their own. Eight of the 14 young people who displayed HSB only in groups were attending schools where other students were also displaying HSB. For five, harmful attitudes amongst the student body were identified as an associated factor, and for four they were in schools where youth-generated images had been shared without the consent of the young person who featured in them. For young people who only sexually harmed alone the only factor identified in their schools that was associated to their behaviours was HSB amongst other students – this applied to five of the 24 for whom frameworks had been produced.

In terms of the neighbourhood-based risks and vulnerabilities, living in gang-associated neighbourhoods (n=12) or having a lack of safe spaces in which young people could socialise (n=11) were the factors most readily identified in frameworks. Child sexual exploitation was also identified in the public spaces in which nine young people were spending their time – (five of whom displayed HSB only in groups, two who sexually harmed others both in groups and on their own, and two who only sexually harmed others on their own). Experiences of social isolation or bullying in their local neighbourhood was also experienced by three young people who had

sexually harmed others alone – this was not a factor recorded for any young people who only sexually harmed in groups. Five young people who sexually harmed peers alone had also been subjected to threats in the local community – for some this was associated to the social isolation that they experienced and for others it was related to the community response to the allegation of sexual abuse made against them. Three young people who sexually harmed others in groups had also experienced threats in their local neighbourhood but this was as a result of gang-association rather than social isolation linked to their HSB.

It is important to note that all of the above may be under-recorded as school and neighbourhood-based factors were less routinely recorded by professionals on the frameworks than characteristics of peer or family relationships.

Strengths and examples of resilience

In addition to the risks and vulnerabilities detailed above, practitioners documented strengths and resilience factors displayed by young people and/or their families, in addition to those identified within peer relationships, school and community contexts. This information exemplified how family and peer relationships acted in ways that protected young people or prevented further escalation of HSB, and as such provided a direction for intervention although few patterns were identified by cohort.

Whether they were displaying HSB in groups, on their own, or both, it was the strengths and signs of resilience that were demonstrated by young people (as opposed to their families or in other contexts) that were most readily recorded by professionals. Strengths and resilience factors amongst the individuals involved were recorded in frameworks for 21 of the 25 young people who were sexually harming alone, all 15 of those completed for young people who only displayed HSB in groups and six of the 10 submitted for young people who harmed both alone and in groups. These largely referred to: the extent to which a young person was 'positively engaging' in services (n=19); the fact that a young person had recognised their behaviour as harmful (n=16); a young person's attainment level at, or engagement in, school (n=14); and the positive relationship that young people had with professionals. In essence, they related to the young person's ability to engage in positive activities and interventions, particularly when these were designed to address the HSB incidents in question.

Similarly, practitioners noted strengths within the families of young people featured in the frameworks. Nineteen families of young people who only sexually harmed alone, 14 of those who only did so in groups and six of those who did so both in groups and on their own had identified strengths which contributed to their ability to positively intervene with, and influence, their children. Examples most prevalent within the frameworks were: the quality of the relationship between the young person and their parent (largely their mother) (n=13); that the parent/s was supportive of the interventions being offered by services (n=11); that the parent/s was able to recognise the young person's behaviour as problematic; and to a lesser extent that the young person had a close relationship with their sibling (n=7). These categories largely mirrored those identified for individuals – namely the relationship that the family had with services, levels of engagement and understanding/recognition of the incident in question.

It is important to note the differences, however, between cohorts. Nearly all young people who only sexually harmed in groups were in families where there were identified strengths and resilience factors and few identified risks or vulnerabilities. For many in this cohort, therefore, there was little about their family dynamic that appeared to be associated with the abusive and harmful behaviours they displayed. This was different for young people who sexually harmed, at least in part, alone – particularly those who had also harmed in groups. As noted earlier in this briefing the majority of these families featured vulnerability and/or risk factors that may have been associated to the behaviour of the young people in question – and far more frequently than the risk that they were exposed to in their peer groups.

Across all of the cohorts, far fewer strengths and signs of resilience were identified in peer, school and community contexts. This may have been due to difficulties that practitioners faced in identifying and/or recording information that was specifically about these contexts. However, it may also be due to the fact that many young people who were sexually harming alone were socially isolated and were therefore unable to engage with, and draw upon, strengths within wider social contexts. Whereas for young people who sexually harmed others, at least in part, in groups, few strengths or examples of resilience were found in their peer relationships which were often characterised by harmful attitudes and behaviours.

Where strengths within peer, community and school contexts were identified (across, rather than specific to, cohorts) they related to the fact that a young person:

- Had access to some peers who challenged their HSB (n=6)
- Had positive relationships with professionals in school (n=12)
- Was attending a school that clearly applied bullying policies and procedures (n=6)
- Had access to safe spaces/services within their local neighbourhood (n=7)
- Was living in an area with an established response to anti-social behaviour (n=7)

Summary Profiles

Before considering the practice responses that were developed for these 49 young people, it is important to collate and summarise, where possible, the thematic findings on behaviours, vulnerabilities, risks and strengths as they applied to the three cohorts.

The cohort of young people who solely sexually harmed others on their own struggled with social interaction, and had fractured relationships with peers and families. They were often bullied at school and when bullying in the local neighbourhood was recorded on frameworks it largely applied to this group of young people. While few in number, examples of young people assaulting their parents, being rejected by parents or living in homes where parents were absent were only features of family dynamics for young people who sexually harmed others on their own. The vast majority of this group had some form of learning difficulty, and over half were thought to have low self-esteem and/or poor social skills. Problematic online behaviours were a notable feature amongst them. And while only true for a small number of them, risk factors such as cruelty to animals and displaying HSB in

earlier childhood were only recorded for this cohort of young people. When abuse of a sibling, partner or younger child was recorded by professionals it was on frameworks for young people who harmed others alone – or who committed these particular acts of abuse when they were on their own.

The cohort of young people who solely sexually harmed others in groups was relatively well socially networked and was often in safe and protective families (compared to those who harmed alone). Where individual vulnerabilities and risks were identified for this group they were largely with reference to them, displaying harmful attitudes towards women and girls, and/or living in families where they were exposed to domestic abuse. This cohort were only recorded as harming same-age peers rather than younger children or siblings, and when they did so often abused others in front an audience of peers. Their behaviours were interwoven with the dynamics of their neighbourhoods, schools and peer-associations. Their peer relationships were often characterised by shared harmful attitudes towards women and girls, repeated incidents of sexually harmful and abusive behaviour, and the bullying of peers. Some of these peer dynamics were informed by school cultures in which: fellow students were also engaging in HSB; harmful attitudes had been identified amongst the wider student body and/or youth-generated images had been shared without the consent of the young person who featured in them.

The ten young people who both sexually harmed in groups and on their own appeared to present the most problematic behaviours and were living in the most vulnerable and unsafe situations. Nearly all young people in this cohort had displayed physically violent behaviours in the past. All bar one of the young people identified as recruiting others into abusive behaviours were part of this group, and the explicit use of blackmail to threaten and coerce those they abused was also unique to this cohort. All of these young people were living in families where they had experienced abuse, and nearly all had been exposed to HSB at home or witnessed sexual activity by other family members (largely siblings).

Young people across all three groups' demonstrated examples of strength or resilience but few of these were cohort-specific. It is important to note, however, that the families of young people who sexually harmed in groups (and never on their own) were more likely to demonstrate protective behaviours and be in a position to support any interventions proposed by practitioners.

Practice responses

Considering that young people's contextual profiles varied according to whether they sexually harmed in groups, on their own or in both manners, the responses to their behaviours that were recorded within frameworks were strikingly similar. The majority of responses recorded across the 49 frameworks focused on intervening with young people's individual behaviours and the influence/capacity of their families (as illustrated in Table 4):

Focus of intervention	Sole[4] (=15)	Group (=14)	Both (=10)
Individuals	46	28	21
Families	23	18	9
Peers	10	8	3
Schools	12	2	2
Neighbourhoods	6	4	2

Table 4 Contextual responses by case type

Interventions with individuals were most readily delivered by social care and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The local gangs unit or panel was also drafted in to plan assessments for three of the ten young people who sexually harmed both in groups and on their own – a response that was less readily utilised for others featured in the frameworks. Five (of the 25) young people who only displayed HSB on their own, four (of the 14) who displayed HSB only in groups, and two (of the 10) who harmed others on their own and in groups also received healthy relationships education.

Responses to families were primarily focused on behaviour management and boundary setting education – this was the case for young people across cohorts. Parenting interventions such as 'Triple P' (n=3) and multi-systemic family therapies (n=2) were offered to families of young people who were only sexually harming in groups but were not recorded on frameworks completed for those who did so, at least in part, on their own. It is important to note that despite domestic abuse between parents being identified as a familial vulnerability on 22 frameworks, only three referrals to domestic abuse services were recorded by professionals and interventions designed to address the impact of this on young people were not explored at all.

Furthermore, despite the experiences of social isolation experienced by young people who sexually harmed alone and the negative peer influences recorded for those who sexually harmed in groups, frameworks recorded little in the way of peer-group intervention. Two frameworks of ten that recorded issues of social isolation documented plans to offer young people access to diversionary activities in a bid to expose them to new and safe peer associations. For the most part the identified associations between young people who sexually harmed, at least in part, in groups and their peer relationships (18 frameworks) were left unaddressed by the proposed interventions. Two frameworks recommended disrupting peer associations, two suggested referring peers for intervention and two proposed the use of gang-injunctions, but no framework explored interventions to create pro-social peer norms for these young people or to build upon the examples of positive peer relationships (identified in six frameworks) in which HSB had been challenged.

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[4] Some frameworks documented more than one intervention for a particular context or individual hence the numbers of interventions being greater than the numbers of frameworks for a particular type of HSB

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE

Interventions within school and neighbourhood environments were rarely recorded on frameworks. Practitioners struggled to identify interventions that would disrupt or change problematic characteristics of school environments – and this was confirmed during the de-brief session with lead professionals. Healthy relationships programmes within schools – delivered to whole year groups or the wider student body were considered in two frameworks, and safety plans in schools were also drafted for two individuals who had displayed HSB on their own. However, the wider HSB and problematic attitudes displayed by other students in the schools of those who had sexually harmed others were largely unaddressed within frameworks. Neighbourhood policing was drawn upon in response to two referrals and detached youth work was referenced for another two as a means of disrupting neighbourhood-based risk for young people who sexually harmed alone. Surveillance and increased security was placed onto the homes of two young people who sexually harmed alone, following threats in their local community.

It was evident from challenges recorded in the templates (detailed below) and the nature of interventions offered, that local safeguarding partnerships were significantly limited in their ability to address the contextual dynamics associated to the cases under analysis. Interventions largely relied upon child and family social work interventions, 1:1 CAMHS support, 1:1 youth service voluntary provision and healthy relationship programmes. Despite the focus on families amongst recommended interventions, familial factors that appeared to be associated to the behaviours being displayed by young people, such as exposure to domestic abuse, were not addressed. During the de-brief session professionals highlighted challenges in building responses to contextual dynamics but also promoted the use of this study's framework as a mechanism for drawing attention to these gaps in service provision. Using a tool that explicitly noted the contextual issues associated to HSB – particularly that which was displayed in groups – increased awareness of the gaps in service provision and identified where practitioners required further support, partnerships and resources.

Challenges to responses

Across all frameworks and cohorts, the most consistently recorded challenges for responding to young people who sexually harmed others were: the attitude and understanding of the young people being worked with (25 of 49), a struggle to engage them in services (26 of 49) and difficulties in engaging their families (18 of 49). For young people who sexually harmed, at least in part, in groups, peer engagement, or an inability to engage with peers, were also identified in 10 out of 24 frameworks (compared to four of those completed for young people who sexually harmed on their own). Previous negative experiences of services (n=8), confusions regarding who the lead agency was in building a response (n=6), and disagreements between services about the objectives of interventions (n=3) were all recorded for young people who harmed in groups but not those who only harmed on their own. These particular challenges in responding to group-based HSB require further consideration. It appeared from the information available that young people who sexually harmed in groups had experienced negative contacts with policing, education and social care services – particularly in terms of their exclusion from schools and the extent to which they had been sanctioned in the community. These relationships with services appeared to extend beyond the concerns related to the

HSB that they displayed but nevertheless undermined the ability of practitioners to gain the trust and engagement of young people into interventions to address their harmful behaviours. Finally, a lack of therapeutic resources were more readily identified for young people who sexually harmed others on their own (n=7) than those who did so in groups (n=3). However, the reason for this difference is unclear.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

The findings from this study have implications for the way that group-based HSB are both assessed and addressed. Information held in the 49 frameworks suggests a struggle to impact the peer-associated factors of HSB, and a limited understanding amongst practitioners of the way in which school and neighbourhood dynamics may be related to these issues. Comparatively, practitioners appear well-equipped to understand, identify and record factors within families and individual characteristics that are associated to HSB and have a number of interventions in place that they can offer to families – particularly where a lack of boundary setting or problematic approaches to parenting are concerned. However, other familial factors such as the impact of domestic abuse on young people's behaviour require far more attention. In the absence of services to address risks and vulnerabilities within peer, school and neighbourhood contexts, families remain the focus of interventions even when their nature bears little relevance to the behaviours of concern.

Gaps in service provision

Information provided in the 49 frameworks and reflections offered during the practitioner de-brief illustrated particular gaps in services to address contextual risk and vulnerability within peer groups/relationships, public/neighbourhood spaces and to a lesser extent in schools. These gaps also appeared to reduce the ability of practitioners to build on the strengths and resilience within families of young people who were being negatively impacted by risks within peer relationships or school/community contexts. Practitioners who were working with the 49 cases recorded in the frameworks would have benefitted from services, interventions and approaches that could address:

- The impact of exposure to domestic abuse of young people
- Occasions where the influence of negative peer relationships outweigh those within families in shaping abusive behaviours
- Harmful social norms within peer groups which underpin or encourage HSB, or maximise positive peer influences
- School cultures that normalise HSB – particularly through a multi-faceted intervention which seeks to address student and staff attitudes, the physical design of the school space, the wider relationship and sex education curriculum, bullying behaviours and/or exclusion policies
- The relationship between street-based sexual violence, child sexual exploitation and HSB within communities and neighbourhoods
- Local design/planning issues which create areas in which young people can display HSB that are undetected or where professionals have little influence

It is also clear that practitioners require support to understand some of the differences in the profiles of young people who only sexually harm in groups, those who only do so in their own, and those who do both, to identify the implications for their approach to assessment and intervention. The vast majority of interventions that were proposed within frameworks had been designed to work with young people on their own – whereas some young people required interventions that worked with their peer groups more widely or provided them with access to safe peer relationships. This requires services to be developed by those with an expertise in group-based and community intervention as opposed to those who only work with young people on their own.

The gaps in service provision identified by this study need to be addressed via the piloting of peer/school/community interventions that are evaluated in relation to HSB. During the de-brief session professionals noted that while it was clear that peer group interventions were required for example, this type of resource was rarely commissioned by statutory services or funded by trusts and foundations. For as long as safeguarding partnerships are only able to draw upon 1:1 and familial interventions, the contextual risks and vulnerabilities identified in this study will remain unaddressed, and yet associated to, HSB.

Developing and extending the use of the contextual framework

Despite the challenges that some practitioners faced in completing the contextual HSB framework, during the de-brief session all stated that they had found it an extremely useful tool for exploring the contextual dynamics of HSB and mapping out their responses. As a result, all four sites who participated in this study are continuing to use the framework to guide and record their HSB meetings and some are considering using it as a tool for discussing safeguarding plans related to young people more broadly. Even though they found it difficult to document vulnerabilities, risks and protective factors within schools for example, those practitioners who managed this noted that it changed their approach to thinking about intervention, and created opportunities for them to change the social conditions in which HSB were actually developing. For example, they were more inclined to think about recommending the need for relationships and sex education provision within a school for example, or identifying a resource that could be deployed into public spaces, such as neighbourhood policing or detached youth work, as part of a response to HSB when using this framework.

In order to facilitate the process of developing and extending the use of the framework the research team have produced an online tutorial on how to complete it. This has been designed to ensure that practitioners are able to understand the difference between individual and contextual factors – and trigger them to think about characteristics of peer, school or neighbourhood contexts that could protect against, or increase the likelihood of, HSB occurring.

We are monitoring the use of this framework in the four sites that participated in the study and are developing plans for sharing the tool more widely through training and other dissemination routes, to enable other sites to access it as a resource should

they wish to do so. Professionals who have already used the framework are well-placed to advise other sites about the process for setting up meetings in which to use it, the principles of the approach and the most effective ways of gathering information to complete it.

References

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Appendix A: Contextual HSB Framework

Reference Number: _____ **Practitioner Signature _____**

Group or Sole Offence:		Points for discussion / recording at HSB MAP meeting								
		Young person's current situation	Young person's HSB	Vulnerability factors (pre-existing factors)	Risk factors (factors directly related to HSB)	Resilience factors	Strengths	Professional involvement to date	Planned actions / interventions	Challenges / barriers to intervention
Individual and contextual factors to consider	Individual young person's characteristics									
	Family / Home(s) characteristics									
	Peer group(s)									
	School(s)									
	Neighbourhood spaces (specify)									

Appendix B – Coding Framework

Information recorded in frameworks were coded in NVivo initially against the primary node. The child node was then used to either:

- Detail the nature of what had been identified (these were created as they were identified in the templates)
- Code it as an issue that was about an individual, family, peer group, school or neighbourhood

Secondary child nodes were used for those factors that had been coded contextually to then provide further detail about the nature of that which had been identified. For example evidence of domestic abuse within the family would have been coded as a vulnerability (primary node), that was familial (child node 1), that featured domestic abuse (child node 2)

Primary node	Child node 1	Child node 2
Young Person's Situation	Detailed as identified i.e. Excluded from school Living in care	N/A
Vulnerabilities	Individual Familial Peer School Neighbourhood	Detailed as identified i.e. History of victimisation Social isolation
Strengths	Individual Familial Peer School Neighbourhood	Detailed as identified i.e. Good communication Good attachments
Risks	Individual Familial Peer School Neighbourhood	Detailed as identified i.e. Criminality Harmful sexual behaviours
Response	Individual Familial Peer School Neighbourhood	Detailed as identified i.e. Social care assessment Detached youth work deployment
Offence characteristics	Detailed as identified i.e. Against peers Against younger children Weapon used Multiple instances	N/A
Challenges of Response	Detailed as identified i.e. Non-engagement from individual Non-engagement from family	N/A