Contextual Safeguarding and case management systems

Emerging lessons from across the Contextual Safeguarding programme

Carlene Firmin

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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. Since 2017 local authorities in the UK have been exploring how to implement a Contextual Safeguarding approach across their children's social care departments in response to extra-familial harm[1]. System-wide implementation has had implications for the case management systems used by children's services. This briefing summarises emerging lessons for the designers and users of case management systems in children's services with an interest in Contextual Safeguarding; all information shared in this briefing is taken from the Contextual Safeguarding research programme at the University of Bedfordshire. All sites are midway through their testing of the approach and so the learning presented here is emerging, and may change when pilot results are fully available in 2021.

The Contextual Safeguarding programme

Led by Carlene Firmin, a team of researchers and practitioners at the University of Bedfordshire have created and been testing the idea of Contextual Safeguarding since 2011. From 2018-2022 the Contextual Safeguarding research programme is divided into three thematic portfolios of work:

- **Children's Services System Change**: Co-creating and documenting attempts to create Contextual Safeguarding systems within children's social care and wider safeguarding partnerships in the UK
- **Examining extra-familial harm**: Studying the contextual dynamics of extra-familial harm and the implications for the design and delivery of statutory and non-statutory services to safeguard the welfare of young people.
- **Developing contextual interventions**: Supporting and capturing the development of interventions that either target the social conditions of abuse or work to create safety in peer group, school or community settings.

Numerous research projects are delivered under these three portfolios; all inform, and are informed by, the programme's virtual practitioners' network and strategic engagement groups with policymakers and sector leaders.

For the purposes of this briefing emerging evidence is drawn from three research projects that span two of the thematic portfolios above:

1. Children's Services System Change:
   a) The Hackney Project: the first attempt at a full systems implementation of Contextual Safeguarding. This included developing contextual recording systems – first manually using Microsoft programmes, and latterly identifying how to embed them in the children's social care case management system, Mosaic by Servelec
   b) The Scale-Up Project (National and London): a multi-year programme to document the testing of Contextual Safeguarding in nine local areas in England and Wales. This includes: the creation of contextual recording systems in the case management system provided by LiquidLogic in five sites (four outside of

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[1] Defined as forms of harm that are largely (although not exclusively) instigated beyond young people's families/parents/carers such as sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, serious youth violence and teenage relationship abuse.

London, and one in London); further testing of the changes made to Mosaic in the Hackney project, and; identifying opportunities to embed context into the all-Wales case management system.

2. Examining extra-familial harm:
   a) Securing Safety: a study into the rate, cost and impact of relocating young people in response to extra-familial harm. The first stage of this study included interviews with 15 areas about their ability to record and report the rates at which they used relocations. During these interviews findings emerged about the functionality of case management systems in cases of extra-familial harm.

Learning from these studies has been combined to produce this briefing. Full details of each project and the methodologies they employ, can be found on the [Contextual Safeguarding website](#).

Briefing Structure

This briefing is organised into three sections. The first section summarises thematic lessons about what Contextual Safeguarding may require of case management systems, with reference to: recording extra-familial harm; documenting contextual information relevant to young people's individual cases, and; creating records on contexts and groups. The second section shares and answers frequently asked questions about embedding Contextual Safeguarding into case management systems. The final section makes some interim recommendations based on evidence to date and details planned developments for this area of work over 2020 and 2021.

Section 1: Thematic Lessons

Recording Extra-Familial harm cases

Young people are referred into children's social care each year in England and Wales due to concerns they are experiencing extra-familial forms of harm (ADCS, 2018; Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Lloyd & Firmin, 2020; Ofsted, 2018). In the *Securing Safety* study alone 2,128 young people were open to 13 children's social care departments due to extra-familial harm in September 2019 (Firmin, Wroe and Skidmore, 2020). Dip-sampling for social care records in five Contextual Safeguarding test sites identified 92 child and family assessments authorised in June 2019 for young people affected by extra-familial harm (Firmin et al., forthcoming).

The way that such harm is recorded on case management systems is complicated and inconsistent. Complicated as they often only allow for one harm type to be recorded in a static manner on a young person's record whereas young people can experience various types of harm at once or over the period of time they are open to services. Interview participants for *Securing Safety* reported that it was often challenging to report a primary harm type for young people who were vulnerable in extra-familial contexts:

> *I think will look to identify those what you would categorise in CSE [child sexual exploitation] as opposed to CCE [child criminal exploitation]. But overarching, it will be those at risk of exploitation. I think we're just really concerned that we don't actually put someone in a specific box and become blinded to what else could be going on* (SS Interview, LA A)

Our CE [criminal exploitation] list started very much has a CSE [child sexual exploitation] list and then we were saying we need to understand the differentiation of risk and I was being quite challenging at the time saying actually we should be looking at risk across the board… But what we've got to the farcical point is that we have a CE list which has some information about sexual exploitation and some information about criminal exploitation and wouldn't you believe it, our girls are being sexually exploited and our boys are being criminally exploited (Interview LA-E)

Further to this, researchers in the *Scale-Up* project have identified multiple cases in which extra-and-intra-familial forms of harm interact; for example a young person who is being criminally exploited in their community and living with domestic abuse at home. Neither harm type is more important than the other; both require attention when deciding on the support required.

Inconsistencies in case recording have also emerged across the research projects. Not all local areas use the same 'outcome' or 'referral' markers for recording different forms of extra-familial harm. For example, some use 'exploitation' as a catch-all term, whereas others break down 'sexual exploitation' and 'criminal exploitation' when recording this harm-type. *Securing Safety* interview participants often reported that sexual exploitation 'flags' were commonly, and more consistently, used in their services, and that they had recently introduced flags for criminal exploitation with the same ambition. But the issue of whether to use an exploitation flag, extra-familial harm flag, or record the different forms of exploitation, is unresolved in a number of areas:

*We have a flag for exploitation. That's right across the board. We have to go down into each of the cases where we ... So obviously you've got your child protection plans where it's part of a plan in terms of exploitation and everything. (*SS Study, Interview LA-C)

Also, at the other end for us, we have just launched a new form and we've built in one of our questions around categories of harm. We've added extra familial harm as one of our categories, but they only got launched last month so we've got quite a small data set at the moment around that. So, that will include if there's a child protection strategy held, whatever the legal status of the child it will tell us whether the risk was familial, extra familial or both that was being discussed (SS Study, Interview LA-I)

Setting aside harm via 'exploitation', all projects referenced in this briefing have identified gaps in the recording/reporting of other extra-familial harm types. Serious youth violence, trafficking, teenage relationship abuse and peer-on-peer abuse not linked to exploitation, all appear to be inconsistently recorded on case management systems – if at all. In both the *Securing Safety* and *Scale-Up* projects researchers have noted particular gaps related to 'teenage relationship abuse'; with no consistent route for identifying domestic abuse referrals that related to young people's own relationships – as opposed to abuse they were exposed to in the family home.

So at the moment we do record, but I think like a number of places actually, what we've got to is a point where we're quite good at recording and tracking children who are at risk of child sexual exploitation, but less good when it comes to other forms of exploitation, harm. Well, we don't track other forms of contextual safeguarding concerns, so things like peer on peer abuse. We simply don't have any kind of markers or systems for tracking it day to day. (SS Study, Interview LA-D)

I think other local authorities as well have become too probably focused on in vogue areas of concern and maybe media hype, and to the detriment then of other things like, for example, your serious youth violence and peer on peer abuse, which probably hadn't had that kind of attention that your CSE has had, for right reasons of course but

not necessarily helpful in this world, which seems to be quite knee jerk in terms of how it responds to trends and patterns (SS Study, Interview LA-H)

Both the *Securing Safety* and *Scale-Up* projects suggest that a consistent approach to recording extra-familial harm is needed. The contextual nature of extra-familial harm shapes the nature of the interventions and partnerships required to address it (Barter, et al., 2009; Brandon, et al., 2020; Firmin, Warrington and Pearce, 2016; Firmin and Hancock, 2018; Lloyd, 2019; Ringrose et al. 2011; Smallbone, Rayment-McHugh and Smith, 2013). Knowing the overall rate of extra-familial harm identified by children's social care can inform decisions about the commissioning of services, and the development of partnerships. Further to this, the *Securing Safety* study has identified a relationship between the extra-familial nature of these forms of harm and the perceived need to use out-of-area placements as a safeguarding measure. Local areas who can't consistently record and report extra-familial harm also can't report, without a manual case review, the rate at which they use relocations in these cases. There appears to be less consensus, however, on the need for drop-down specific categories to cover all harm-types. These queries tend to relate to different harm-types intersecting or being experienced differently by young people over time. There is also the risk of labelling young people who are referred for support in relation to a specific harm type that, following assessment, is later deemed to be absent in their case. Creating functionality to archive harm-types, and provide a rationale for this (i.e. this is no longer an issue for the young person, or this was never an issue for the young person) may also become important if a range of drop downs are used in practice.

Recording contextual information

When developing a 'Level 1' Contextual Safeguarding approach local areas are identifying ways to more explicitly consider (and where helpful record) extra-familial contexts and relationships, when undertaking work with children and families. There are a number of ways in which case management systems may be able to support a move in this direction.

When children are referred into children's services their home addresses are recorded but the location(s) where they have been harmed (if known) may be included in detailed case notes but are not recorded in a reportable fashion. Amendments have been made to referrals forms in a number of local authorities so that locations of harm can be recorded. Test sites are exploring the implications of this change presently, and ways in which such information may need to travel with a young person's record, through the case management system, should the referral result in an assessment or offer and/or support – or any challenges such activities may pose to protecting data, and managing information sharing, in a way that continuously safeguards the welfare of young people.

Practitioners are developing and using a suite of tools to explore the dynamics of young people's peer relationships, schools and communities, when undertaking assessments and developing plans. For example, they are undertaking safety mapping work with young people to identify any locations where they feel unsafe and using this to identify opportunities for building safety (or access to guardians) within those spaces, as part of a plan. They are also working with young people to map friendships; understanding those relationships from the perspective of young people and building plans that increase protection and support within relationships that young people identify as important. This work is helping them to ensure risk and protective factors beyond families are sufficiently considered during assessments – and recommendations for plans recognise the impact of extra-familial contexts young people's behaviours, and those of their parents/carers. In addition to attaching these documents, such as peer and safety maps, to a young person's file, practitioners may need to record how the information within them has shaped the final conclusions of an assessment. Having space to record external factors that may undermine, or boost, parental capacity to safeguard their child, for instance, and having prompts to
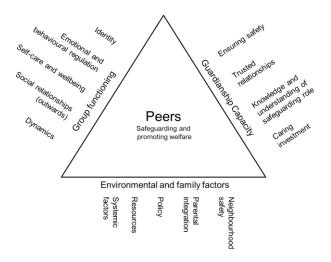
consider extra-familial factors in this regard, is one way to explore how to incorporate context into assessments.

Finally, it is important that contextual factors identified during assessments are adequately attended to in plans. Historically, much contextual information was recorded in detailed case notes but was not tracked through to plans which instead focused predominantly on interventions with individual young people and their parents/carers (Firmin, 2017). Furthermore, findings from the *Securing Safety* study, found that when young people were relocated to other areas due to extra-familial harm plans didn't always attend to the contextual factors that had led to those relocations (Firmin, Wroe and Skidmore, 2020). Asset Plus, the youth justice case management system in England and Wales, features areas where practitioners can record 'external controls' – factors beyond a young person or family that also need to be addressed in this case to 'reduce risks of offending'. From a Contextual Safeguarding perspective, having a similar function in a child's social care record could prompt a professional to consider whether the extra-familial factors identified during assessment have been adequately attended to in safeguarding plans and provide an accessible route for those who are reviewing plans to check whether this is the case.

Creating case management pathways for groups and contexts

All Contextual Safeguarding test sites are designing pathways through which children's services can refer/assess/plan/provide support to groups and locations. This activity is referred to as Level 2 Contextual Safeguarding and creates systems and practices which are intended to increase safety in groups or locations themselves – rather than solely recognising the impact of these groups or locations on young people's behaviours (as would occur at Level 1 Contextual Safeguarding). But if a group of young people, for example, are all found together in a property linked to criminal exploitation, or are all connected to a sexual assault in a park, how should the group, the house or the park, and any action taken to increase safety in these contexts, be recorded on case management systems?

One way this is being explored in test sites is via assessments of, and plans for, groups of young people and locations. The peer, school and location assessment triangles, designed during initial testing in the London Borough of Hackney are providing a framework for this (Contextual Safeguarding Network, 2019 – see example of a peer assessment triangle below).

Meetings have been held to discuss groups or locations under the three headings on these triangles. Notes from these meetings have been recorded in the same fashion. For example, in relation to groups:

- What is the functioning of this group?
- What is the guardianship capacity around this group?
- What are the environments where this group is spending their time?

This ensures that meetings, and notes, about contexts are largely anonymised and de-individualised; it is intended to compliment work underway within plans for individual young people rather than duplicate it.

This work is often recorded on excel spreadsheets and word documents as case management systems haven't had the functionality to record case notes for anyone but a named child. However, some providers have started to build options for opening a case on a group or location, using the titles in the context assessment triangles as headings for recording. This work remains in test – as does the question of whether/how practitioners can attach their young people to a peer group or location record; so that as that record is updated they will be notified. Personal information of each child connected to that group or location won't be visible in the context record.

Developing the best way to record assessments of, and plans for contexts will be important for the sustainability of Level 2 Contextual Safeguarding within children's social care. Many conversations about groups and locations take place informally in local areas, and there is no way to track whether factors identified have been addressed. With information held in the heads of practitioners, rather than organisationally, work previously undertaken in localities can be lost. Further to this, it is hard to ensure all practitioners are kept updated about work in a location, or with a group, that is relevant for their young person; even though such work may be relevant to the assessment of a young person who they are supporting. Resolving these challenges is part of the test work that is underway –and the extent to which case management systems play a role in such resolution.

Section 2: Frequently Asked Questions

Much of the work shared in this briefing is being tested until 2022. Therefore it isn't currently possible to answer all the questions that it raises. However, from our work to date, some frequently asked questions about Contextual Safeguarding and recording systems that can be attended to, are:

1. *How can GDPR requirements be attended to when recording contextual information?*

   Information recorded about groups, schools or locations should be thematic and therefore not contain any personal information about young people and their families. Case management systems can play an important role in making this possible. If it is possible to connect practitioners to context records, then they can see which other professionals are supporting young people connected to that context without seeing the names or personal records of those connected young people.

   Meetings should also be largely thematic. The one area where this is likely to be more challenging is during meetings to discuss peer groups. While we would recommend the meetings are largely organised around the heading of group functioning, guardianship capacity and environmental factors – individuals or sub-groups may be named when discussing group functioning. We are seeking further

legal advice on this during 2020 and will publish updated guidance on peer group assessment in 2021.

2. *Young people's peer groups change all the time so how can we create static records about them which don't reflect this reality?*

If group recording is to play a role in Contextual Safeguarding systems, it will need to reflect the dynamic nature of peer relationships. At present local areas have created naming conventions as part of agreeing how and when to open a record on a group – and how the information collected in this process is to be managed. For the most part this has been around an incident – hence it is not assumed to be a permanent group, or even a friendship group. Some areas have decided not to use the term peer group at all and are instead referring to 'groups', 'associations', 'networks' or 'non-familial connections'.

Being able to attach children open to children's services to a record of a group might also be able to assist with this, especially if they can be unattached when the group assessment is no longer relevant to any individual young person.

3. *What would you call a location on a case management system?*

As is the case with peer groups, local areas will need to agree upon a naming convention they want to use. It may be that a post code is used, or the name of a building or organisation. It could also be that the location type (i.e. park, stairwell, bus stop) plus postcode is used for locations that are quite specific. Further testing of location pathways should help to clarify what local areas require from case management systems in order to record information about locations (and the plans taken to increase safety within them) – and as this occurs, further resources will be published via the Contextual Safeguarding network.

4. *How would you record contexts associated to criminal exploitation – like a drug route?*

It is important not to conflate the recording of contexts with the recording of harm types. In theory any context can be associated to any harm type (although some contexts are more readily linked to some forms of extra-familial harm). Contextual Safeguarding approaches are focused on contexts themselves. So, if it is possible to record information about a context for sexual exploitation or serious youth violence, the same approach would be taken to recording a context about criminal exploitation. There may be some contexts that are unknown and where this is the case it isn't possible to assess or intervene with them – and so a record would not necessarily be created for them. Contextual Safeguarding is also principally focused on drawing context into child welfare systems, not replicating policing work. It is more likely that the police would be investigating a drug route than that route be the subject of a social care assessment. Although the welfare of young people at an educational establishment, where young people have been groomed into that drug route, may require a broader welfare assessment – as it would if there were concerns about peer-on-peer abuse occurring in the setting and so on.

5. *How do we avoid creating multiple or duplicate datasets given that the police also record information on groups and locations?*

As alluded to in response to question (4) Contextual Safeguarding approaches are principally concerned with how to draw context in children's social care and wider child welfare responses to extra-familial harm. The police will hold data on crime.

Local authority assessments may also identify evidence of crimes, but they more broadly record the welfare needs of young people. Just as many families will receive support from children's services but not be under a police investigation, so too would locations and groups come to attention of children's services and supported via a safeguarding plan but not necessarily be linked to a criminal investigation.

Furthermore, the way information is collected for social care assessments is not the same as police investigations. Safety mapping with young people may identify locations where they feel unsafe, but these won't necessarily be the same contexts that appear on police profiles due to crime reporting. Where it is required, bringing together information to inform a social care response to a context may be helpful – in the same way that is sometimes used at multi-agency meetings for domestic abuse or child protection conferences; but the safeguards that would need to go around such data-sharing require further thought, with attempts to articulate these underway in test sites. This does not negate the need for children's social care to be able to organise the information they hold in a way that is usable. Solely holding contextual information in case notes, and not in a manner that enables responses to contexts and groups associated to extra-familial harm can create missed opportunities to identifying routes for intervention and protection.

6. *How do you reflect that work has ended with a context on a case management system – i.e. formally close the case?*

Local areas are in the process of exploring this. There are multiple factor to consider.

The first is the measure of 'safety' in a group or context that would satisfy a partnership that such level of oversight is no longer required. This isn't about eradicating risk. It is about being able to evidence that the guardianship around a context/group, the environmental factors associated to harm, or the functioning/needs of a group/residents/students, have been addressed to the point that safety has increased. Creating frameworks to record this may help to ensure that social care oversight is only in place for instances where is it is required – avoiding the over-involvement of statutory services in the groups, schools and community settings.

Secondly, the naming convention used will play a role. It will be important that should the same location/group come to the attention of services again there is way to reflect back on work undertaken to date and avoid duplication (or build on previous successes). If naming conventions are clear, then returning to a context that has been closed to review a chronology will be possible. If there isn't a clear naming convention information could be lost.

Thirdly, a context may cease relevance to some individual young people but not to all. Case management systems that enable individuals to be attached to context records will have a route to ending a connection between some young people and a context – while keeping that same context open for others.

Section 3: Recommendations and next steps

At this stage of testing many questions remain of how, and to what extent, case managements systems can support the development of a Contextual Safeguarding approach. Learning from the work thus far, however, does allow us to make some initial recommendations for those developing or using case management systems in children's

social care in response to extra-familial harm. We recommend that business development leads, independent reviewing officers and professionals in children's services work with case management system providers to:

Create an overarching harm category of 'extra-familial harm' for use in case records

Local areas and providers will need to work together to identify the most appropriate way to create an overarching 'referral' and 'outcome' marker related to extra-familial harm, so that the rate of these cases referred into, or overseen by, children's social care, are accurately documented. Resolving the lack of consensus about drop-drown categories could also feature in such discussions, and potentially an agreed policy and functionality to ensure flags are used in ways that protect, and address the needs of, young people rather than label them as associated to a harm type in a way that is permanent or inaccurate.

Identify and test opportunities to record reportable information about context on a young person's record

At present, much information about peer groups, schools and locations are recorded in case notes and can only be identified through manual analysis of files. Creating ways to record contextual information at the point of referral, during assessments, and in relation to young people's plans, will create mechanisms for reviewing the extent to which plans sufficiently address contextual factors impacting the welfare of young people and a parent's capacity to safeguard them. Engaging young people, parents and practitioners in discussions on how best to achieve this will be important.

Create and test spaces to record context interventions in a reportable fashion on records

If actions are required in extra-familial contexts to increase safety for an individual young person, recommendations for these actions and the extent to which they have been progressed may need to feature in a reportable fashion on case records – and testing options for this will be helpful. Being able to identify whether contextual factors are addressed across cases, can inform commissioning decisions in a local area and identify any gaps in service provisions, or partnerships that need to be attended to, in order to for actions to be taken in the future.

Ensure that any context assessments embedded in case management systems are created in a confidential format

At this stage we recommend that any records created on contexts or groups are designed to record thematic rather than individual information. Identifying mechanism to connect these records to those for individual young people should further enable this approach. It will be for local authorities, and wider partners, to ensure a policy framework is designed which details how information documented in these records are shared and used – including via consultation with young people, parents and communities.

The year ahead

Test sites will begin piloting their Contextual Safeguarding systems from autumn 2020. Wherever possible they will engage with test version of case management systems during pilots to assess their usefulness for both Level 1 and Level 2 and Contextual Safeguarding. The London Borough of Hackney will also be testing the connection of the peer group assessment framework in their case management system and using it to connect to individual records to inform this wider testing period.

The Contextual Safeguarding team are working with providers of case management systems in test sites to prepare for this pilot period, including supporting attempts to embed the context triangles into case management systems. During this time work will also increase to understand the implications of the approach for the All-Wales case management system.

Conversations have also commenced with Signs of Safety to ensure that any work done to embed Contextual Safeguarding into case management systems are compatible with their existing case management system options. This will prevent situations where areas would need to choose between a Signs of Safety or Contextual Safeguarding option for their case management systems.

Finally, a second legal briefing on Contextual Safeguarding will be published in late 2020 with further consideration on the legal framework for peer assessments and how this could be accommodated within case management systems.

Should you have further questions about the implementation of Contextual Safeguarding in case management systems, or have examples of this work that you want to share with the Contextual Safeguarding team please contact Carlene Firmin on carlene.firmin@beds.ac.uk

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