Context Weighting Guide

Using context weighting to inform assessments and planning in cases of extra-familial harm

**June 2022**

Laying the foundation

What is context weighting? How do you decide where to target responses to harm? This guide talks you through the process including how to use context weighting in assessment and planning

Overview

As you incorporate contexts into assessments you need to prioritise where to target your response. One way to achieve this is thinking through which contextual factors – and contexts themselves – have the greatest influence over the problem you are trying to address and targeting those first. In other words – asking yourself 'what context (or contextual factor) needs to change first for safety to increase for that child, family, peer group, etc'. We call this process 'Context Weighting'.

In the process of Context Weighting professionals produce an image to illustrate the various contexts in a young person's life, and their level of influence.

In the image below, what was happening in a young person's school presented the greatest challenge for him and for the adults who were trying to support him; these challenges were also negatively influencing the level of safety in his peer group.

Family

School

Peer Group

Neighbourhood

Durham University

University of Bedfordshire
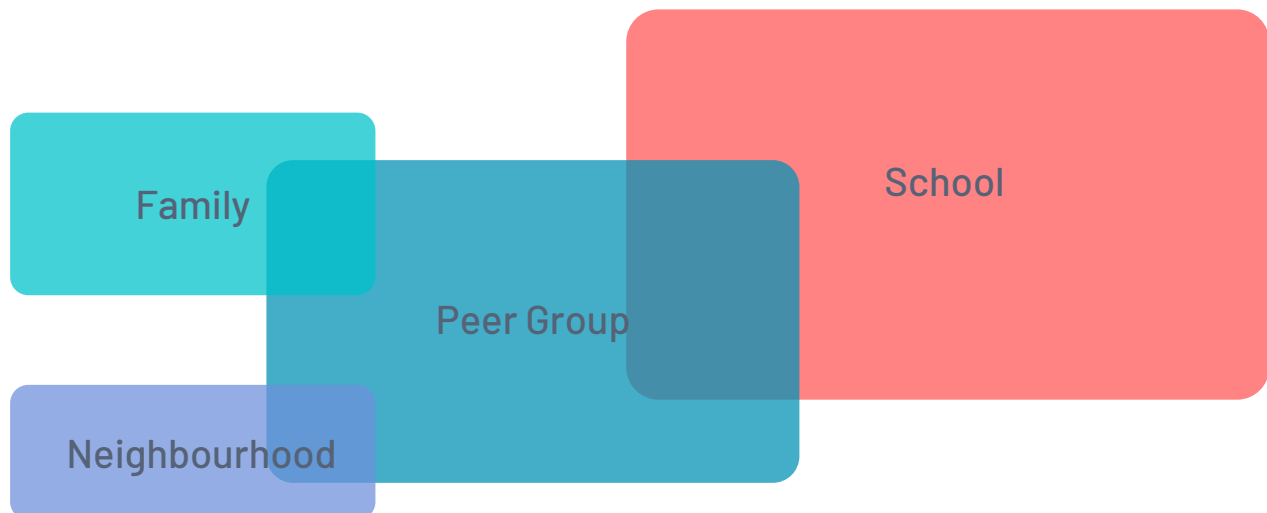
Case Studies

A case example using four scenarios

Consider a group of young people who have been found with knives at college. When assessing the needs of one of the young people in this peer group, a practitioner can use context weighting to identify:

a) Which context(s) around the young person needs to be targeted to prevent them from carrying knives in the future – for example, their peer group and their college?

b) How have the different context(s) where they spent their time influenced each other? How has this in turn influenced the young person's behaviour? For example, is their peer group influencing how safe they are at college, or are there wider factors at play in the college that influence feelings of safety within the peer group?

Depending on the information gathered during the assessment process, Context Weighting could surface a range of scenarios – each warranting a different type of plan. Alongside each scenario, we present an illustration of how the assessment findings would be displayed in a Context Weighting image. This would then be used to discuss and plan responses that target the most influential context.
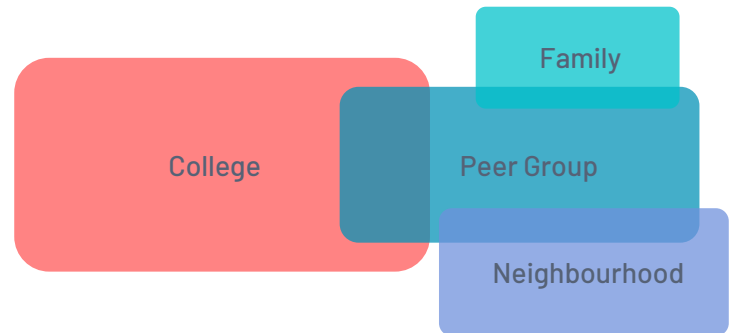
Scenario One

The assessments suggests that this young person's peer group has normalised weapon carrying. The young person uses violence in a range of community contexts as well as at college. Two other young people in the group seem to be influencing the behaviour of others, and this dynamic is particularly relevant to how the group seems to behave when they are together. The parents of the young person whose safety is being assessed are been overwhelmed by the influence of their child's peers and feel like they can't keep them safe, despite their best efforts to be protective.
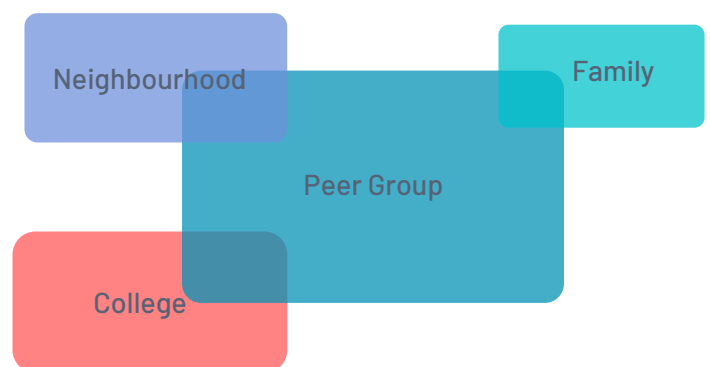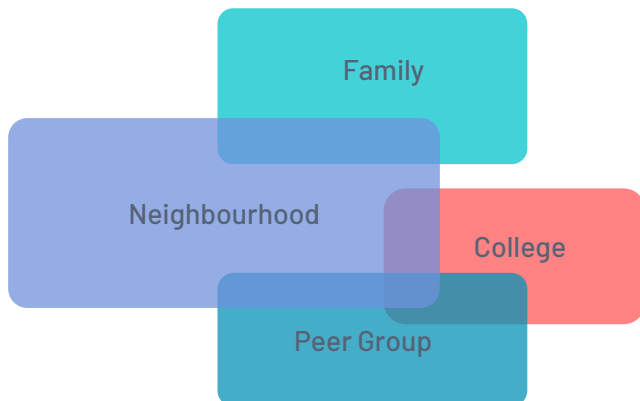
Scenario Two

The assessment suggests that young people in this peer group feel unsafe when they are at college. They have been threatened by young people in the year above and have started to carry weapons for protection following a recent assault in the toilets. Other young people (who are not part of this group) have also been found with knives in college. Staff have been unable to address incidents of peer-abuse and don't feel that they can keep students safe.

College

Family

Peer Group

Neighbourhood

Scenario Three

The assessments suggests that this young person, and a number of their peers, feel unsafe on their journey to college: many have had mobiles phones stolen. Furthermore, one young person in the group has started to travel with a younger brother who he also wants to protect. When they can, the young people in this group hide weapons under cars and in bushes near the college but they have recently been threatened at the gates of the school when leaving and on the walk to the bus stop, and so they think they need weapons closer to hand.

Family

Neighbourhood

College

Peer Group

Scenario Four

The assessments suggests that this young person's peer have normalised weapon carrying and use violence in a range of contexts. This young person, and one of their peers, have been living with chronic and escalating exposure to domestic abuse between their parents. This peer also has an older brother who is being criminally exploited to traffic drugs. This young person and his peers seem to influence the behaviour of other young people they spend time with.

College

Peer Group

Family

Neighbourhood
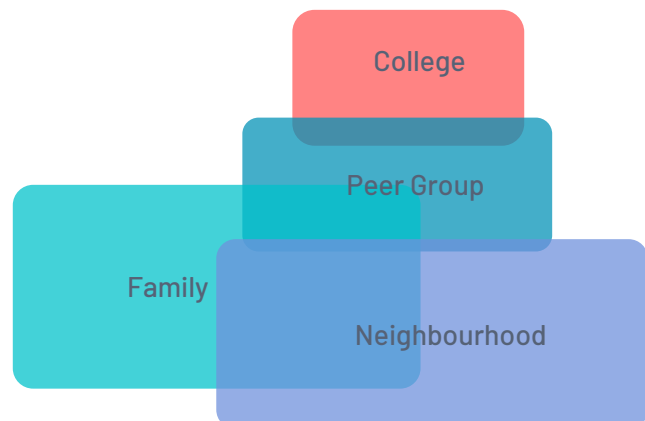
Benefits of Context Weighting

There are three benefits to using Context Weighting when developing plans for young people affected by extra-familial harm.

Benefit One

Context Weighting allows you to visually depict the context (s) that need to be targeted as part of a young person's plan.

Young people affected by extra-familial harm may have complex experiences of harm, spanning months, if not years, and involving a range of adults and peers. Information on the various contexts where they spend their time are therefore often buried in detailed case notes, but don't always come to the fore when plans are being developed. A visual representation of contexts impacting a young person's safety at that time can avoid this information being lost. It can also focus the attention of a partnership on the contexts that need to be prioritised, ensuring everyone has the same understanding of factors that require attention at any given moment.

There may also be disagreement amongst partners as to where safeguarding responses should be focused. Visually representing Context Weighting can surface these differences.

Discussion prompts if there are disagreements:

"Do you all agree that this/these contextual factors need to be addressed first?"

"Do you all agree that these are the contexts most in need of our attention?"

Benefit Two

Context Weighting allows you to visually depict where contextual factors overlap with each other.

What happens in a young person's peer relationships may influence their sense of safety in a local park. Likewise, their sense of safety at a transport hub may also impact their sense of safety at school (as they don't feel able to travel there). In other words, contexts impact on each other. Context Weighting allows professionals to illustrate this in an image and consider the relationship between contexts in the planning process.

Discussion prompts to interrogate the relationship between different contexts:

"If we intervene with the college what might happen to this peer group?"

"Does this peer group act this way at the youth club and at college or just when at college? "

Benefit Three

Context Weighting allows you to assess whether the plan developed to support a young person is targeted in the right place.

If professionals use Context Weighting to:
a) identify contexts most in need of a response and b) agree which contexts are influencing others, they can then assess whether their proposed plan is targeted in the right place. When contextual factors are buried in case notes alone it isn't uncommon to find plans solely focused on intervening with a young person through 1:1 support or sanctions and/or family intervention. While these may be useful responses in their own right, they won't necessarily address other contextual factors associated with extra-familial harm. Whereas if professionals agree that the context that needs to be targeted is a young person's college (and the levels of violence that have occurred there), and that these dynamics are currently impacting a young person's peer relationships, then this raises different questions for professionals to consider.

Introducing Context Weighting into the assessment and planning process

It is important to view Context Weighting as a dynamic activity. It can happen at various points in the planning process. It is helpful to check at various points whether the target of a plan is still the right one. Also, as safety increases in one place or relationship, the Context Weighting for a young person may need to be adapted, and the plan updated.

During Scale-Up, Contextual Safeguarding Context Weighting activities happened:

- In the conclusions of initial assessments

- During strategy discussions

- When preparing reports for Child Protection conferences

- When assigning a category during Child Protection conferences

Discussion prompts to discover if the response plan is targeted at the right place:

"Why are rates of violence increasing in the college – do we understand this yet?"

"Are there any additional supports we need to include for this young person's peers while work with the college continues?"

"Will the interventions/responses we have planned reduce rates of violence at the college?"

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In the conclusions of initial assessments

Context Weighting at the end of an initial assessment allows a practitioner to foreground key contextual information and recommend which contexts feature as a focus of any ongoing plan. Context Weighing is also often used at this stage of the process to identify the extent to which challenges within families, and actions of parents, are attributable to the extra-familial harm in question. In other words, is the box representing the family in the Context

Weighting diagram one of the largest or one of the smallest? In some areas, this conclusion has informed the type of plan used for a young person: a statutory (Child Protection) plan where the family context is considered a priority target and a voluntary (Child in Need or Early Help) plan when extra-familial contexts are the priority. In areas that have trialled 'alternative' planning and conferencing pathways for cases of extra-familial harm, Context Weighting during initial assessments has also been used to similar effect.

During strategy discussions

When deciding upon s.47 enquiries professionals in some areas discussed which contexts appeared relevant to a young person's safety. These discussions helped the lead professional identify which contexts to consider when conducting enquiries – for

example whether to prioritise gathering information about a young person's school/college, or particular public places where they spent their time, to inform the assessment.

When preparing reports for Child Protection conferences

Context Weighting can be included in reports that social workers prepare for Child Protection conferences. There may be a range of contexts impacting the safety of a young person at any one time, and it isn't always possible to discuss all of these factors in one conference. Introducing Context Weighting into the

conference report alerts a conference chair to identify the contexts most in need of discussion. It also informs all conference participants of the current priorities for increasing safety and reducing risk – and therefore can act as a point of reference when agreeing an outline plan or revising a plan at a review meeting.

When assigning a category during CP conferences

In areas that are trialling the use of Child Protection conferences for cases of extra-familial harm, Context Weighting has also been used when assigning a 'category' to a plan. Professionals may say, 'this young person is at risk of significant

harm due to physical abuse in [x context]'. In these instances, professionals use Context Weighting to not only state the level of harm a young person is experiencing, but where this harm is occurring.