Learning from a Peer Group Assessment

In this Spotlight feature Cat White, Contextual Safeguarding Advisor in the London Borough of Ealing, shares her experience of developing a peer group assessment, at 'Level 2' of Contextual Safeguarding.

About Cat

I had the honour of authoring Ealing's first peer group assessment in August/September 2019. Being a Contextual Safeguarding Advisor for Ealing, I get to think about how young people can be supported to be safer from the risk of extra familial harm as a core part of my job. Although I wouldn't typically undertake assessments day-to-day, it was proposed that my specialism rendered me a 'good fit' for trialling this new way of working and developing a template that other colleagues could hopefully go on to follow.

Christina Evers, who is Ealing's Contextual Safeguarding Co-ordinator and my line manager, provided supervision and oversight during this process. Having a helpful person to regularly check-in with is important during any assessment but especially when the process is still so new and evolving.

Although the resources available via the CS Network were invaluable during the planning and undertaking of this assessment, Christina and I were both excited to have the opportunity to design and trial an approach that best fits Ealing as a local authority and the specific safeguarding needs of the peer group.

How did we develop and inform the peer group assessment?

The peer group itself was identified through Ealing's Multi-Agency Vulnerability and Exploitation Safeguarding Panel. On this occasion, all the young people had an allocated social worker. From the beginning it was felt that an independent author was important for the credibility of the peer group assessment – an approach that we thought worked.

During the assessment I interviewed colleagues in the relevant police gangs unit as well as the local authority's Safer Communities Team, Youth Service and allocated social workers (unfortunately not all social workers were available to take part owing to leave and the timescales to which we worked).

Lloyd, Balci, Firmin and Owens's 2019 Peer Group Assessment Framework, available on the CS Network, was central to the process and I kept a visual of it close-by during both the designing and authoring of the final report. Inevitably, there was some overlap amongst the observations and suggested interventions that went under each heading. Christina and I also noticed that we didn't necessarily share the same views about which findings would fit under which category which was a helpful aspect of supervision discussions and represented

learning for us both. This structure helped me to organise and present my findings as well as providing an anchor to the assessment's purpose should the scope of the task ever feel less clear.
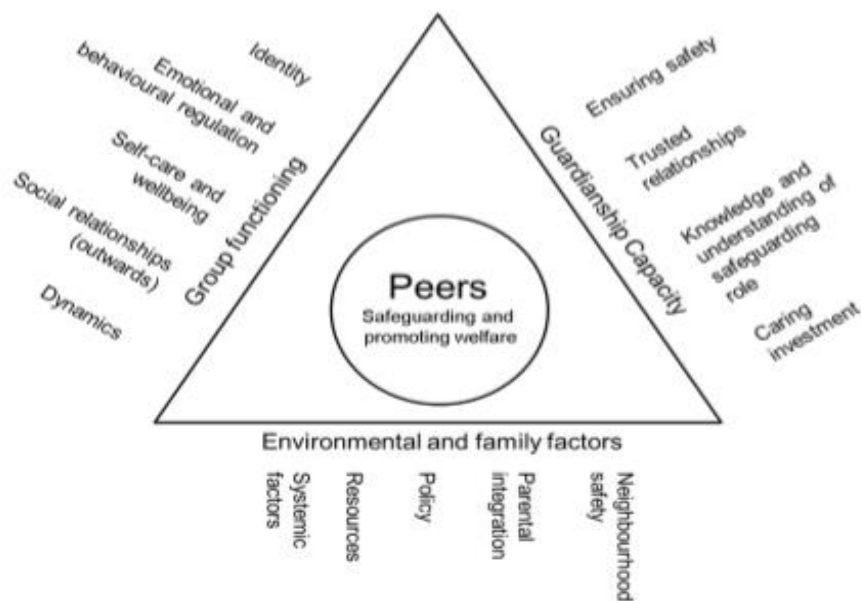
Figure one: Peer group assessment framework (Lloyd, Balci, Firmin and Owens, 2019)

Key Reflections

The visual guide also served as a reminder to consider the safeguarding needs of the group as opposed to the individuals within it who each had a child and family assessment in existence already. Thinking about the overarching needs of the group was at the crux of what made this process different to any assessment that I had undertaken previously and, as such, was the main subject of reflection and discussions during supervision.

Considering strengths

Dr Carlene Firmin and her team at the University of Bedfordshire, who have been working with Ealing as we try out and develop different ways to safeguard young people against extra-familial harm, often refer to the strengths of peer group relationships and the importance of working with and considering young people as a group with its own needs.

Understanding what needs this peer group met for its members – be it a sense of safety or emotional support – was essential to driving forward a meaningful plan for safeguarding. I also reflected that a sense of loyalty and love – both of which were apparent in this group – can help to explain motivations for behaviours that regrettably do not necessarily help young people and others to be safe. So often in my role I learn of situations whereby young people feel coerced and threatened into behaviours. It was helpful to be reminded of the complex reasons that unsafe situations may develop.

I also discovered that unlike so many adolescent groups, this was not a transient or fleeting group – it was longstanding and represented security, fun and often a positive way for its members to spend their time in a locality where there were dwindling examples of safe spaces for young people to be together. This group had also connected with the staff at the local youth

centre from whom both they and their families frequently sought and received guidance and support. Being able to explore and name the way professionals had built these positive connections was, in my opinion, a strength of the final report both in its acknowledgement of this example of excellent practice as well as helping to inform how others might be able to forge positive relationships with young people.

Working collaboratively

All colleagues and key stakeholders seemed eager to participate in and support us in this assessment process. We also found them to be willing to listen to and think creatively in response to any assessment findings that indicated changes to approach could help both relationships with young people and safeguarding.

For example, our colleagues in Safer Communities do now consult with social care and our youth offending team prior to seeking civil enforcement actions to help inform the appropriateness of actions, promote safety, and think about the next steps. Additional guidance has been written to support colleagues with this work. Safer Communities have also been supported to consider the language used whenever they undertake any written descriptions of a young person's physical appearance to avoid unintended offence and the undermining of professional-young person relationships.

We learned that there is some dependence on the ability of the assessment author to frame learning in a diplomatic way as well as their capacity to mentalise contributors and prevent the assessment jeopardising collaborative working. However, it's a credit to our colleagues that they were able to listen so thoughtfully and take proactive steps towards positive systemic change. It's my experience that we have a particularly dynamic and collaborative culture within Ealing's Safer Communities team anyway. However, I sought considerable support from Christina when figuring how to frame these findings in the assessment which was a further example of the value supervision.

Mindful that the assessment could only ever be a 'snapshot' in the lives of the group we were seeking to support, and knowing that their lives move on fast, I undertook and wrote-up this assessment quickly. It took me about a month from starting the interviews to finishing the write-up. That being said, the findings already felt relatively 'dated' upon completion. I think reminding readers of this reality could be a standardised feature of any peer group assessment. I was also mindful that I've seen snippets of written reports that seem to be repeated on a young person's case file for years after. I was aware that anything I wrote could 'follow them'. Through this assessment I wanted to do justice to the complex, nuanced and ever-changing lives of the group we were assessing when presenting information.

Trusted relationships

We also learned that assuming the social worker would be best placed as a route in to speaking with and understanding a peer group was not helpful. Although in no way a negative reflection of the social workers (some of them were brand new to their case) they did not typically know these young people as well as other professionals involved with them such as, on this occasion, the Youth Service. Next time, we plan to figure out in a meeting at the start of the assessment which professionals have the closest relationships with the young people and the capacity in which they can facilitate the assessment.

I was looking forward to getting to speak to the young people during the assessment and perhaps rather naively hoped they might feel like co-authors to the final report. Sadly, I never got to meet any of them. I now recognise that it was hard to explain to them what the assessment process was when I was still figuring it out myself and perhaps an even tougher ask of the social workers to relay this information for me.

As well as being clear and concise when explaining what the assessment process is, I would recommend there is a flexible approach to meeting with the young people including giving them different times and dates for meeting up (and being clear that it's ok if they change their minds at any stage) and giving them some say in where the meetings happen. This was a challenging time in the lives of this peer group and meeting with me, who they had never met before, and when they had so much going on, was not their priority.

It was uncomfortable for me to reflect that, although I never got to meet this group who I came to respect and admire so much during the assessment process, the final report seemed accurate and useful anyway. The professionals who contributed were able to provide invaluable information that I was able to triangulate. This did not sit well with my values as a social worker seeking to empower and collaborate with young people rather than doing safeguarding 'to' them.

Information and data protection considerations

Information sharing was a complicated part of the assessment planning and final write-up including deciding on where the assessment would be stored. We were mindful about ensuring that information was shared for the purposes of safeguarding only – a further issue that I would recommend is always spelled out in any peer assessment write-up.

For the next peer group assessment we plan to be clearer from the start about how the assessment can be shared with those who contributed towards it and in a way that helps them to see the value of their contribution and promotes safeguarding. I noticed upon completing the write-up that although various professionals knew lots about this group, the information had probably never been presented in this way before. Inevitably, the different agencies who were involved did not share identical motivations for their assessment involvement and ongoing work with this group and I was acutely aware that the young people involved had a right to respect and privacy. The concept of information being shared on a 'need to know' basis was one that needs further working through but we feel better prepared for the next assessment.

It would be remiss for me to not note that although the assessment participants were all eager to help and invested in supporting this group to be safer, I was asking for colleagues to give up time away from their busy schedules to take part. Because of the challenges detailed above, participants did not get to read the final report. For this first assessment I drafted a written synopsis of the assessment rationale, purpose and process and disseminated this amongst participants. Next time, we plan to support colleagues to feel a sense of joint ownership of the end report from the very beginning including an initial briefing meeting that includes an opportunity for questions and answers.

Creating parameters

We've also learned that we probably can't overemphasise the importance of clear parameters for any peer group assessment as well as every contributor being clear on its purpose. A set peer group have been identified (as was the case with the first assessment) for the next assessment and who have been involved in a number of concerning incidents. A test for any assessment content will be if it contributes towards the safeguarding of that peer group. If it does not, its inclusion should be carefully re-considered.

Planning for change

Although this peer group assessment contributed towards systemic change that is still developing and being understood more than 18 months later, I sadly don't think the peer group itself will have noticed any tangible improvements in their day-to-day lives that were the result of this assessment. Ethically, that's tough to sit with. For the next assessment Christina and I have proposed that the assessment contributors all think together about potential and SMART interventions at the start of the assessment process whilst being mindful that the assessment findings could lead to other ideas and direction. Not only might this group-think process lead to a generation of ideas that a single author and their supervisor may not have been able to come up with but it may also help to persuade young people be more involved in their own assessment if the potential outcomes are explained to them before the assessment begins.

I was excited about and invested in this peer group assessment. Although I'm proud of it, it was long and realistically not readily replicable. The supervision space could be used to help the final report to be concise. Although there can only be one assessment author, we also plan in the next assessment for there to be at least one group planning session for all the assessment contributors to have the opportunity to help with the final assessment findings. Ideally, we would be seeking for the peer group themselves having a clear voice in the final write-up too.

Enablers to development

I want to take this opportunity to thank colleagues who contributed towards this peer group assessment and their willingness to go above and beyond to help young people to be safer. I'm also grateful to Christina and the senior leadership team in Ealing for letting me 'have a go'. Sometimes we learn as much from the things that didn't go so well as the things that did and that was certainly the case with this assessment. It's my experience that Ealing's leaders seek to promote positive change through innovation of which I think this peer group assessment attempt is an example. My professional learning journey has been enriched as a result and I'm especially grateful to this peer group for all they have taught me and the positive changes they have contributed to in Ealing. I'm excited to hear about how colleagues in other local authorities get on with their own peer group assessments and the learning we will achieve together.