

Responding to extra-familial harm

A case study

June 2022

Safeguarding responses across multiple contexts

How should safeguarding partnerships respond to extra-familial harm? What does it mean to assess and respond to a context of harm? Here we draw on examples from the Scale-up project to tell an illustrative composite case study to provide inspiration and generate ideas.

Creating a context focussed panel

This is a story about how one MA panel responded to EFH using Contextual Safeguarding.

In the past, this panel would have received referrals for young people thought to be at risk outside the home. The meetings would run like this: each child would be discussed one at a time and anyone with information about that child would contribute. Often there were gaps in information and it would take a long time. It wasn't always clear what could be done to help the situation, so decisions were deferred until more information was available. The information shared tended to focus on how the young people had come to be flagged, and whether they (and their parents/carers) had engaged with services. Discussions concentrated on the negatives and very rarely the positives. The mostly likely tangible outcome from these meetings was police action, but it was unclear how or whether this created safety for the young people discussed.

The panel was re-formed to take a Contextual Safeguarding approach. This new panel was chaired by a senior social work manager and attended by partners spanning the police, community safety, health and housing as well as the voluntary sector.

At the beginning of every meeting a statement was read out reminding everyone of the agreed intention to focus on the welfare and safety, rather than criminal behaviour, of young people. The meeting chair also explained that the focus was no longer to discuss individual young people's behaviour (issues related to these could be referred elsewhere). The new focus was on the contextual dynamics of safety and harm.

To help with their discussions about safety and harm in different contexts (rather than individuals), the partnership developed a new 'thresholds' policy. It mirrored the existing policy for individual children, but the indicators referred to signs of harm or risk in a context (for an example, see the Hackney Context Wellbeing Framework). Partners attending the meeting were encouraged to familiarise themselves with the policy so that they could use the indicators to guide discussions about the appropriate welfare and safeguarding responses. The meetings were also structured so that strengths and positives had a place alongside the things that caused concern.

Summary

- A new panel meeting
- Chaired by Social Care
- Shared welfare statement
- Focussed on contexts not individuals
- Listening to strengths as well as worries

Setting out the 'case'

The panel receives a referral about group of young people. A youth worker is worried that they are coming to harm in a park.

Consulting their threshold policy, the panel agree that the risks are sufficiently high to warrant a location assessment. They task this to a social work manager, who allocates it to a lead social worker and co-youth worker.

The assessing pair identify people who have an interest in the park – young people and adults. Using surveys, discussion and observations, they gather their views about the safety of young people in the park and surrounding areas.

Agreeing the response

The lead social worker returns to the panel to explain the findings of the assessment. The panel discuss the concerns and strengths within the school the young people attend and the park, and the outcomes they would like to see.

They agree that they want to make the park safer so that young people can spend their time there. They also want to improve the young people's access to school, so as to reduce the time when they might be exploited in the community and to increase their life chances.

The panel agrees that the response should not focus on interventions designed to change the behaviour of the young people. Instead they will work on changing the park and school environments to make them safer.

What the assessment revealed

About the school context:

The young people are on part-time timetables
The school sees these young people as 'hard to reach'

The young people are part of a minoritised ethnic group – their language and culture is little understood by school staff

Staff are concerned and want to engage the young people

There is an psychologist willing to support the staff in reflecting on their practice

About the park context:

Adults are grooming young people to sell drugs for them

Residents are scared and want the young people gone

There is a petition to remove the young people's shelter

Some residents are worried about the young people

The young people want to carry on meeting in the park

Local arts organisations want to work young people

They realise that discrimination, racism and negative attitudes about young people held by adults, is undermining the young people's safety. The panel agree that the response must target these things (what we might think of as the 'social conditions') by intervening with the adults who live, spend time and work in the school or park contexts. Ultimately they hope that these adults can contribute to creating safety for these young people in future.

The park plan

The youth worker will ask the young people about being part of shaping and delivering a community day with the residents

The council will organise signs in the park with QR codes which link to support information for young people

The local police officers agreed to work with the youth worker to improve relationships with young people.

A local arts organisation will offer young people a photography project exploring their experiences and views, which could be displayed in the park

The school plan

School agree that they need do more to re-engage these young people

They agree to work more closely with the Early Help worker who has a good relationship with the young people

The school staff agreed to taking part in reflective discussion with the psychologist about systemic racism and working with people from diverse cultures

The park response

The response team invite residents, local councillors, businesses and local police to a meeting to discuss the safety of young people.

At the meeting the social worker explains about child exploitation and the risks that young people face in the park. The youth worker talks about how young people have the right to spend time together and in this park. They describe how removing the shelter could be more harmful for the young people. People at the meeting are invited to be part of a plan to make the park safer for young people.

The school response

The social worker and youth worker also hold a meeting at the school. They begin by asking the school staff to consider the impact that the part-time timetable is having on the young people's safety and harm. They explain that not only are these young people missing out on their education, but with so much spare time they are much more vulnerable to being exploited by criminal adults.

They also discuss with the staff the impact of racism and whether there is a link between the way that the young people are seen by the school and their ability to access education.

Back at the panel

The social worker and youth worker return to the panel to feedback on the response. The panel agree to support the plans by:

Deploying Early Help resources for increased detached youth work in the park to build trusting relationships with the young people

Tasking police partners with increasing surveillance of the adults exploiting young people in the park and to look for disruption opportunities

They agree to review the situation in the park in three months time to see whether young people are safer. They plan to do this by re-running the assessment processes of surveying, discussing and observing the park and comparing the findings to see what changes had been made to the context.

