

# Contextual Approaches to Schools

Developing safeguarding pathways and practices for school contexts - from safety summits to assessments

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# Laying the foundations

How can social care and schools work together to increase safety for young people? What does a contextual safeguarding response look like in a school? What is the referral pathway and what responses are available? In this guide we provide resources for strategic leaders and practitioners interested in developing contextual approaches to extra-familial harm (EFH) in and around schools.

Schools can be protective contexts for the young people who go there. But they can also be harmful places. Young people report sexual harassment and sexual violence through to physical assaults, relationship-based abuse, bullying and grooming in educational settings. The systems and structures within a school can enable, or prevent, this sort of abuse from happening.

When young people experience abuse linked to their school, it is critical that the school itself (i.e. its culture and policies) feature in the assessment and intervention. This involves identifying, exploring and addressing the underlying factors that are causing and enabling abuse.

Multi-agency partnership help schools to draw on the expertise and experience contained within the wider local community and to work towards the idea of safeguarding being 'everybody's business'. Rather than a referral to social care ending a school's involvement in a safeguarding situation, a Contextual Safeguarding approach requires partnerships where social care, schools, young people, parents and communities work towards creating safety. To do this, we need to understand the dynamics within school contexts and develop responses to reflect them.

This guide is set out in five parts:

1. School context processes: where school contexts fit in the safeguarding system
2. School Assessments
3. Student Safety Summits
4. School partnership meetings
5. When harm doesn't reach a threshold

You can find examples and guides to support each section in the Scale-Up Toolkit.

## Moving forward: Young People's thoughts

*"The kids know what is safe these days and where they feel unsafe. So if adults listen they can do something about the unsafe places because they have the power to do that and make things happen. Kids can't make changes but know where is bad" (Young person, survey).*

*"Knowing the problem spaces could make [Young Person] feel safer at school since the school are acknowledging part of the problem" (Young Person, survey).*

*"What is going on outside of home? Does he feel safe inside and out of school? How's his relationship with friends?" (on the need for more contextual questions - Young person, survey).*



## School Context Processes

Scale-Up sites developed different systems for responding to harm in schools. Figure one below outlines the different processes developed for screening and assessing harm in schools and how this fits within a wider safeguarding system.

Each section in Figure one highlighted in yellow represents a section of this guide. In each section you can find a summary overview. More resources and examples for each section can be found online in the Scale-Up toolkit.

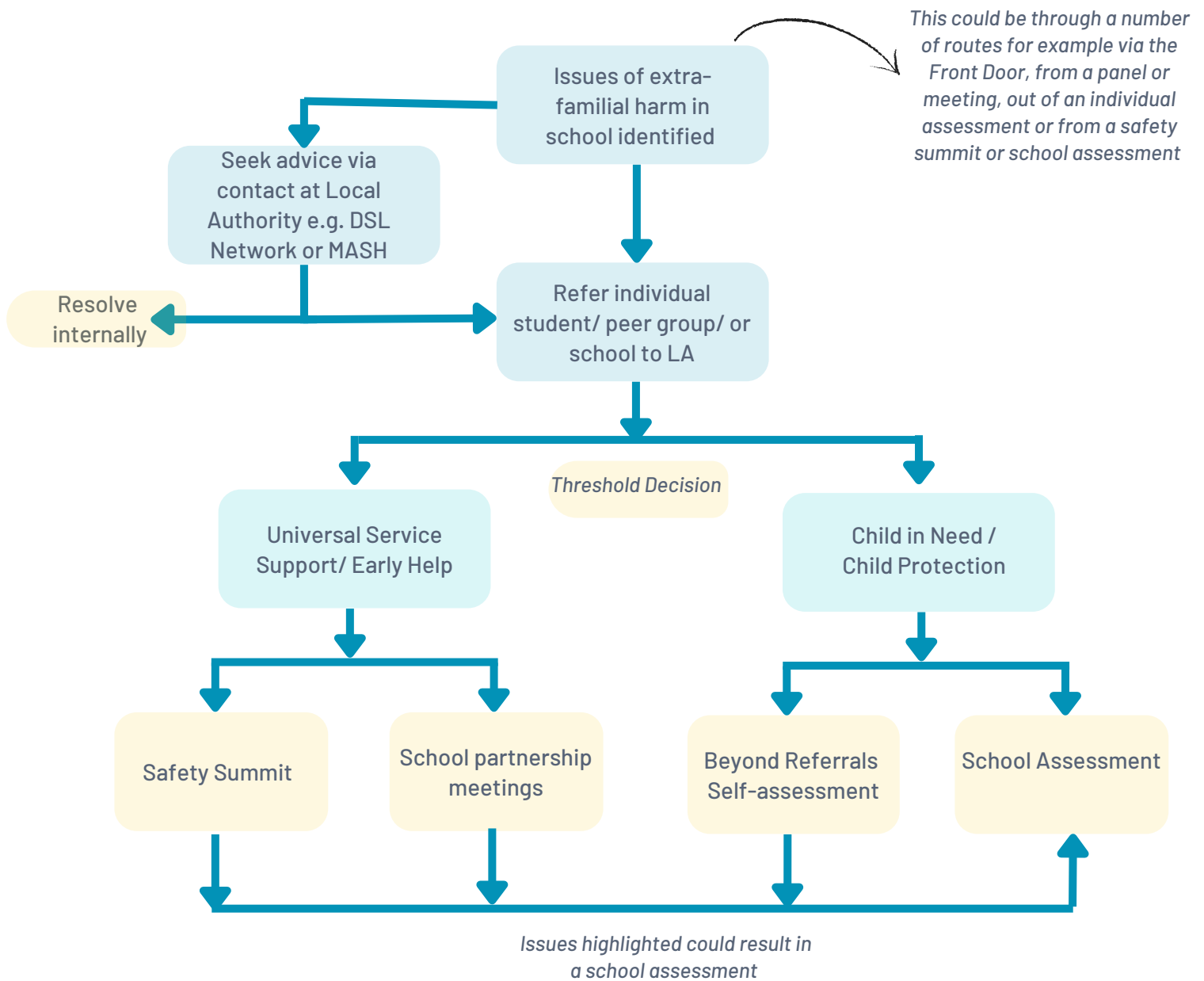


Figure one: School context process

## Thresholds

Threshold policies used by Children's Social Care often outline risks and vulnerabilities that a child or family may be experiencing and what service they could expect (e.g. Early Help or Child Protection). These focus on individual indicators like 'missing from school' or 'use of alcohol'. Alternatively, context threshold policies outline indicators that could affect multiple young people linked to a context and what service could be provided to make the context safer. Defining thresholds are particularly important when creating pathways for something new, like a school, because practitioners may struggle to know what contextual harm is and how it relates to the level of support required. A school threshold policy outlines the pathway for schools at different levels and helps practitioners to consider when an assessment of the school context itself (rather than individual children who go there) is appropriate. Figure two outlines examples of threshold indicators for schools (full version in toolkit).

One Scale-Up site created 'School Support Level Guidance' with four levels of support for schools. In this site, referrals for concerns related to schools were received via four regional 'context panels'. The panels would review the referral, make threshold decisions and allocate the work. A number of options were available:

- Doesn't meet threshold: school to manage internally
- Early Help/ Universal: School could host a 'Safety Summit' or 'School Partnership Meeting'
- Child in Need/ Child Protection: School supported to complete 'Beyond Referrals' assessment or; Children's Social Care would complete a School Assessment.

The process and details of each pathway are outlined in this guide.

Figure two: Example school threshold indicators

### Universal

- Young people state that they feel safe in this context
- Young people report they are exposed to a range of ideas and opportunities to give them choices about their lives
- Young people are aware of safeguarding responses
- Appropriate guardianship and oversight is in place
- Placement decisions are made with relational, physical and psychological safety in mind

### Child in Need

- School has a high rate of fixed-term exclusions or managed moves
- School has high levels of non-attendance and lateness at school
- Adults with responsibility only challenge individual behaviours or respond inconsistently when aware of them
- Adult guardians normalise and accept harmful behaviours
- The school or other context is one in which harmful incidents take place

### Child Protection

- School has a high rate of permanent exclusions over a long-term period
- Instances of sexual abuse/violence within school or other context
- Adults with responsibility hold victim-blaming views
- Adults with responsibility have failed to identify and/or challenge the behaviours or attitudes which put young people at risk of harm
- There is an absence of effective behaviour policies

## School Assessments

Sometimes it may be that the issues affecting schools, or peer groups within schools, meet a threshold which requires support from statutory agencies. This might be concerns at the level of Child in Need or Child Protection, if the issues in the school suggest students are at risk of harm or Significant Harm. To respond to this, sites have developed a school assessment process. First developed with Hackney Children and Families Service, a School Assessment uncovers risks and strengths within school contexts, that are associated to young people's experiences of abuse. Rather than traditional Child and Family Assessments, where individual referrals result in individual assessments for young people who have experienced harm in a school, a School Assessment involves a 'school referral', triggering a School Assessment where a whole school is assessed as a context - to consider the

relationship between the incident(s) and the school environment itself. A School Assessment draws on aspects of the environment to build a picture of how the school can be safer for all young people. Figure three below outlines the different elements that should be considered within a School Assessment. These fall across three domains:

1. Pupil development needs – the dynamics of the pupils in the school, how they relate to each other and the school culture.
2. Guardianship capacity – the capacity, willingness and ability of guardians to keep students safe. Do staff understand their safeguarding role and do students feel safe and trust them to protect them?
3. Environmental and family factors – which other factors affect the safety of the young people? These may relate to the local neighbourhood context, the policies in place to safeguard them, the support of their parents or systemic factors

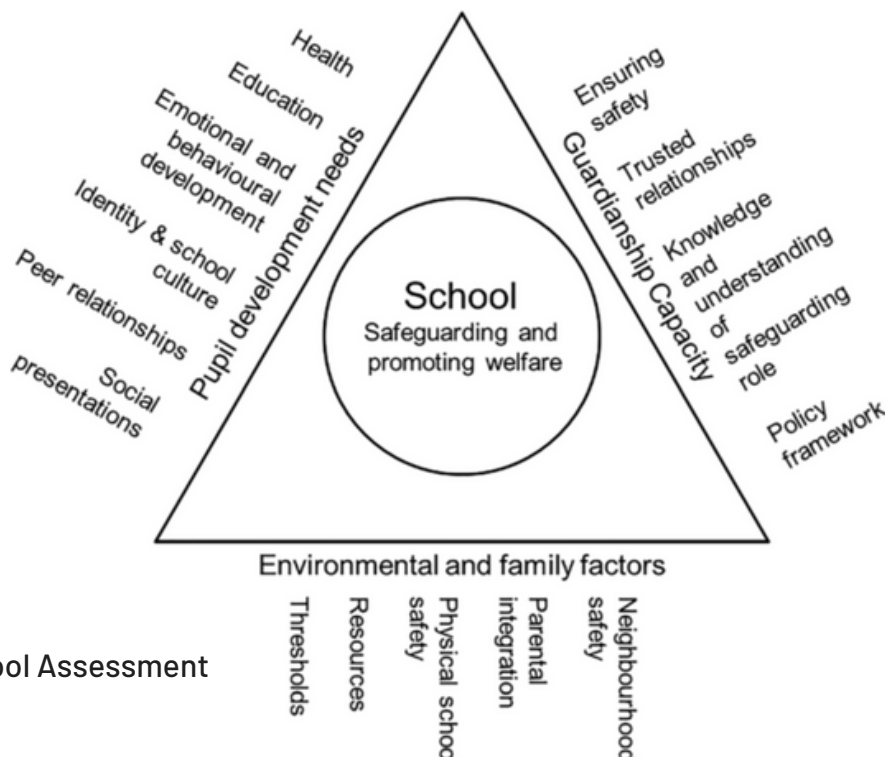


Figure three: School Assessment Triangle

A School Assessment is strengths-based, collaborative and supportive. It is informed by evidence, and works with schools to create whole-school safety. School Assessments are triggered when a school reaches a threshold for multi-agency support, but the way that assessments are run varies across different local authority Children's Services. We outline the keys considerations below.

The underlying principle of an assessment is understanding the nature of the harm taking place within a school and the strengths that can be drawn upon. To do this, the assessment should engage students, staff and practitioners to understand the school context. This process should aligned to the School Assessment Triangle (Figure three, above). It is also important to

consider who will lead the assessment. For example, in a Scale-Up site, members of the practice development team, who were trained in Contextual Safeguarding, conducted a School Assessment. Whoever it is, it is fundamental that it is done in collaboration with the school and not seen as an 'inspection'.

## Assessment Methods

Guidance and examples for methods are included elsewhere in this toolkit including:

- Focus groups with staff, students & parents
- Reviewing safeguarding and behaviour policies
- Reviewing safeguarding and behaviour records
- Surveys
- Observations of the school environment

### Things to consider

- What is the pathway for referring and overseeing school contexts?
- Who holds overall responsibility for a school assessment?
- Who will conduct school assessments
- How are you going to work collaboratively with the school?
- In what ways are young people, parents/carers involved?
- What will the referral or decision-making pathway be if concerns about schools are identified during assessments/planning for individual children and young people?
- What will happen after the plan has been pulled together, who will oversee the plan and measure impact?

*What needs to change in your system so that referrals for school contexts can happen? What format will referrals take? Who will take referrals for school contexts and where will they be recorded? How will information about school contexts be captured at the 'front door'?*

*For example, in one site, School Assessments sat within the Adolescent Service and managed via their 'context panel' meetings. Practice Development Officers (trained in Contextual Safeguarding) would come to key meetings to ensure the project remained focused on achieving Contextual Safeguarding outcomes.*

*As this develops, relationships of trust and respect between Children's Social Care and schools should enable schools to feel confident to self-refer, and/or feel confident about the process of assessment.*

*Review the outcomes and what has been achieved. How will young people, parents and the school community be informed about outcomes? How can we ensure this safety is sustained?*

## Student Safety Summit

### What is it Safety Summit ?

This is an event run by a multi-agency safeguarding partnership to understand how young people feel about safety in different contexts: at school, online, in their community and with their friends and peers. It provides a space for young people and professionals from a number of provisions to come together in one place. Usually this would be hosted by a school and last for half a day.

### Why is it a good thing?

It supports young people to understand that harm that occurs outside of home is not their fault. It increases young people's awareness of Contextual Safeguarding and what and/or who can keep them safe. It supports young people to contribute to changes in their area to increase their safety.

## Example Activities

**Online:** Get students to talk about what online spaces/platforms they consider to be safe and unsafe and what changes could be made to make them safer.

**Neighbourhoods:** Give students large maps of the local area and of their school for them to mark the areas that feel safe or unsafe; ask young people to write down suggestions on how to make unsafe spaces safer.

**Schools:** Ask students about where they feel safe and unsafe in schools. What would a student do if harm happens and who would they speak to. What are the reasons they might not speak to a teacher? What do they think needs to change?

## Planning and Preparation

Who to invite? How do you make it inclusive for young people. What practitioners do you invite? How will you get young people involved?

*In one area, all local secondary schools and colleges were invited, as well as safeguarding leads, teachers, youth workers, police and social care to support and observe the sessions.*

## On the Day

Activities with students could include safety mapping in schools and neighbourhoods, online safety, friendships and peers

*Note: If there are significant concerns of extra-familial harm arising in one school, you may want to consider referring that school for a 'School Assessment' at this point.*

## Next Steps

Plan for following up with students, make a plan and name who is responsible, commit to timeframes, and keep young people informed.

## School Partnership Meetings

School partnership meetings (also sometimes known as Community Mapping Meetings) are meetings led by Children's Social Care with schools as active partners. They are used at an Early Help level to create a plan to increase safety. School partnership meetings support schools to understand and address their concerns about exploitation and extra-familial harm by working with multi-agency partners to identifying concerns and strengths within a peer group or in a location linked to a school (for example a local area where school children spend time). The meetings support schools to address issues at the lowest possible level; develop thresholds and pathway guidance to empower schools; make appropriate referrals; and maximise effectiveness and capture impact of community meetings.

### How do they work?

- School partnership meetings are held online or at the school. They are attended by the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead and pastoral staff, members of Children's Services (who are trained in Contextual Safeguarding) alongside other partners such as VCS and local policing.
- Ahead of the meeting schools are asked to complete a document to start thinking about trends and themes affecting the students.
- There should be clarity around expectations, preparation, information sharing and what happens after the meeting to progress actions.



*You can find exemplar Terms of Reference, information sharing agreements and Agendas in the Toolkit*



*Co-produce this process with schools - ask if there's anything else they want to see included, and what their expectations of Children's Social Care are. Work with schools to explore ideas on how best to develop interventions.*

### Case study

One Scale Up site's school partnership meeting process emerged following initial concerns from a school about a group of female students potentially being sexually exploited by adult males in the community. The group of girls started to turn up to school with designer handbags and clothing that they couldn't usually afford. The school worked alongside the young people's service and exploitation analyst to consider risks that may be affecting the group and locations where harm was occurring. From this, they worked alongside a local organisation for young people affected by sexual exploitation who worked directly with the young people as a group. They also worked with the police, who responded to the adult perpetrators. The site then worked with other schools to trial similar meetings.



## Harm that "doesn't reach a threshold"

Traditionally, many forms of harm within a school setting wouldn't reach a threshold for a referral to social care. For example, some incidents of non-consensual image sharing.

However, abusive and violent behaviours don't happen as a one-off. Rather, they are part of a history of inappropriate or problematic behaviours that have not been effectively responded to or addressed; and as a result, this behaviour can create the context for abusive and violent incidents to take place.

It is therefore important that the multi-agency safeguarding partnership can work with schools to support them to identify and address these 'lower-level' concerns before they become more significant. The ways we have seen that happen are:

### Communication lines

the development of communication lines for school Designated Safeguarding Leads or school leadership so that they can speak to the equivalent Front Door Education Officer at Children's Social Care for advice, prior to referral.

### DSL Networks

Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) Networks – setting up local networks to support DSLs with advice and share good practice. These networks sit outside of Children's Social Care, but the relationship between Children's Social Care and the network was strong and supportive for any advice or interventions needed.

## Beyond Referrals (Schools) Self-Assessment Audit

**Beyond Referrals (Schools) Self-Assessment Audit** - This is a self-assessment toolkit that allows schools to self-assess the factors that contribute to extra-familial harm and develop areas for improvement available on the CS network.

## Beyond Referrals (Multi-Agency) Self-Assessment Audit

**Beyond Referrals (Multi-agency) Self-Assessment Audit** - Similar to the toolkit above, this tool supports multi-agency partnerships to self-assess their response to harmful sexual behaviour, and develop areas for improvement. For more details, search the Contextual Safeguarding network.

You may want to consider how these processes can run in tandem to provide the best support while acknowledging capacity and resource constraints.

## Next Steps

This guide has introduced you to different approaches to screening and assessing harm in schools, and how this can fit within your wider safeguarding system. No matter which process you decide to develop, here are some things to keep in mind:

Taking a contextual approach to school safety is about identifying how the school (and related contexts beyond the school gates) can be made safer for all young people, rather than focusing on individual incidents.

You will need systems and structures (including practitioners, teams and leaders as well as policies and protocols) to support and sustain the work and to produce meaningful outcomes.

It's important to work in collaboration with schools. This is not an inspection, but about building partnership. Learn about the schools' expectations of Children's social care and discuss together how you can best support them to achieve safety.

Engage with young people, parents/carers and staff in this process. Develop assessments and plans based on young people's views of safety. Later on, find out from young people whether anything has changed in terms of their experiences of safety and harm.

Remember to explore the Scale-Up Toolkit for examples and guides to support the development of this work.