

The impact of Covid-19 on identifying and responding to extra-familial harm

Key Messages for Practice

Vanessa Bradbury-Leather

December 2022

Introduction

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on services that respond to adolescent extra-familial harm (harm adolescents experience outside of their families, 'EFH' from herein) has been unprecedented. During lockdown, entire services that would have been delivered in-person were delivered via remote working and the use of online technology. In particular, the closure of schools reduced the ability of the social workers and education partners to safeguard young people their care. At the same time, patterns of exploitation changed as adult perpetrators adapted swiftly to – and took advantage of – pandemic conditions, to find new ways to exploit young people. These conditions demanded that services also adapt swiftly so that they could continue to address the contexts within which young people were at risk of experiencing EFH.

This briefing paper builds on a scoping review undertaken by the Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme¹ at the beginning of the national lockdown to build the evidence base around service response to EFH. It is based on interviews with eight key informants across five local authorities in England. Interviews were undertaken during the summer of 2020, just before schools reopened. The local authorities from which interviewees were recruited were part of a national programme to ['scale up'](#) and embed Contextual Safeguarding approaches, and hence they provide a unique window on what was happening within the wider children's safeguarding system. The briefing will explore perspectives on how patterns of EFH have been impacted by the conditions created by Covid-19, and the ways in which services initially responded. It will highlight challenges faced and identify examples of innovative practice, flagging learning for continued efforts to safeguard young people from risks beyond their families.

Background

The findings in this briefing reflect data that was collected during the first outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was a time when young people and social workers lives were drastically impacted – environments where young people spent their time changed, practitioners worked from home, businesses and schools shut, and government guidance was ever-changing. We wanted to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the changing landscape of child protection, to see whether Covid-19 was impacting EFH and responses to it and capture how social work practitioners adapted and responded during this time. Although time has now moved on, this briefing should contain useful learning for how we respond to extra-familial risk now and in the future.

¹ TCE Programme Team (2020) TCE Support Programme: Action Research on Covid-19. Available at: <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/tce-support-programme-action-research-on-covid-19/>

Methods

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews (n= 3) and focus groups (n= 2) with eight single points of contact (SPOCS) and practitioners working to pilot Contextual Safeguarding approaches across five child and family services as part of the national Scale Up project that was run by the Contextual Safeguarding research programme between 2019 and 2022. The interviews were carried out during the months of August and September 2020.

The interviews and focus groups covered practitioners' observations of:

- the impact that the pandemic had on the prevalence of EFH
- their ability to identify and respond to EFH during the Covid-19 pandemic
- the implications for EFH interventions during Covid-19

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Bedfordshire, Institute of Applied Social Science Research Institute Ethics Panel.

Findings

The findings presented here draw on emergent themes from the interviews and focus groups, providing a window into key areas of concern reported across the sites. Two main themes were identified - 'identification': the ability to identify extra-familial harm during the Covid-19 pandemic; and 'response': the ability to respond to extra-familial harm during the Covid-19 pandemic. Under these two themes, sub-themes were identified. The structure of the findings section is outlined by these themes.

1. Identification

Practitioners provided an insight into the impact of Covid-19 on the prevalence of, and their ability to identify EFH. They reported the following themes: the types of harm identified, changes in referrals, and an escalation of concern around particular forms of EFH.

1.1. Types of Harm

Lockdown measures meant that young people and their families were restricted to their family homes. The practitioners that were interviewed and who took part in focus groups initially predicted that EFH would happen less because of this. However, across the sites, practitioners also shared that they were uncertain about what harm young people may experience and how to respond within this unprecedented situation:

R1: We were being told that the prediction was that domestic abuse would absolutely rocket, we were being told that online exploitation was going to rocket, we were not sure what was going to happen in terms of county lines, we didn't know how many of our young people were going to abide to lockdown, we had no real sense of whether they were going to or whether they weren't going to.

R2: Everything was totally up in the air

R1: And so we were trying to galvanise ourselves to dealing with a situation that was, it was unprecedented, and we didn't know how to respond really to it effectively or what we were going to do that was the right thing. (Focus Group, Site A)

Despite practitioners' initial perceptions that extra-familial harm might happen less, they identified that the following types of harm occurred during lockdown measures:

- Child criminal exploitation (CCE) / County Lines²
- Child sexual exploitation (CSE)
- Online exploitation
- Peer-on-peer abuse
- Serious youth violence
- Harmful sexual behaviour
- Suicide
- Neglect

There was variation in how these types of harm manifested across sites; but from the interview data, practitioners reflected that there were particular increases around criminal and online exploitation that they were encountering in their case work.

1.2. Drop in Referrals

The practitioners we spoke to reported a drop in referrals and reduced reports of missing episodes. These practitioners suggested that these lower numbers could be associated with the lockdown measures themselves: with young people staying at home with their families; or because families feared that if they reported the young person missing, they would be punished under lockdown measures, because it's "*not just missing, it's also a breach of lockdown*" (Practitioner, Site D).

In some cases, practitioners felt that lockdown had provided an opportunity for young people and their families to negotiate their relationships differently. This meant that for some young people, lockdown had created space away from exploitative relationships and provided them with an exit strategy or "*script that enabled them to exit harm effectively, it had taken the pressure off*" (Practitioner, Site B). Practitioners also noted the resilience shown by young people and their families, highlighting how well they had coped despite loss of support from safeguarding services:

On a lot of levels we think the evidence has been that a lot of our young people abided by lockdown, a lot of them were in, a lot of them didn't go out, a lot of them didn't mix with their friends, some of our most concerning young people that we were concerned about, in terms of missing episodes and those sorts of things, they were in, and I think there's been a real lesson for us in terms of the families and the resilience of those families, because they coped and they didn't have the same level of support and

² Practitioners referred to CCE and County Lines interchangeably

intervention and all of those sorts of things, and actually they managed to deal with those situations. (Focus Group, Site A)

While all sites reported an initial drop in overall missing episodes, practitioners stated that missing reports for Looked After Children had increased. In part, practitioners reflected that this was due to young people wanting to go home to their families. However, practitioners also shared that children in care were particularly vulnerable to being groomed and targeted during this period.

This drop related to the beginning of the first national lockdown. Practitioners noted that as restrictions were lifted, referrals returned to similar numbers to before the first Covid-19 lockdown.

1.3. Escalation in Concern

As highlighted above, practitioners reported that initially, due to Covid-19 measures, young people were thought to be at home and doing well with lower referrals to social care. However, there were some contradictions here: with practitioners across sites at the same time reflecting that, while there were less referrals during this period, there was also an 'escalation in concern' around extra-familial harm.

This 'escalation in concern' related to practitioners' concerns around young people's increased vulnerability to extra-familial risk due to the loss of support from, or access to: spaces outside of the family home, access to opportunities for young people that resulted from Covid-19 restrictions, as well as a growing anxiety about what might be missed, or where young people weren't receiving support due to statutory services having to prioritise interventions for 'high risk' young people.

I feel like maybe our more high-end cohort that we were really concerned about, I feel like that kind of continued and we've been able to do that work with them. What I think I've become very aware of recently is the ones that perhaps were lower end that we didn't have so much knowledge on, we've seen a massive escalation in risk around them. (Focus group, Site B)

Practitioners reflected that the closure of schools, youth services, safe spaces where young people could spend their time, as well as the lack of employment opportunities, were all aspects that could be increasing young people's vulnerability to extra-familial risk. For example, while practitioners suggested that the majority of young people stayed inside during lockdown, they also noted that in some cases, large peer groups had been coming together who wouldn't normally spend their time together, contributing to rising tensions:

I think we're just getting to the point where we're seeing a lot of children who are very bored [...] feeling quite hopeless about opportunities and aspirations, and I think that those feelings ... initially have fed into increasing tensions, so we've seen increase in tensions linked to serious violence in our peer-to-peer reviews. (Interview, Site B)

Obviously, with our youth centres closing some of the issues we previously had around congregating children and some of the areas where children were targeted really shifted, but what we've seen coming out of lockdown is a real escalation of concerns. (Interview, Site B)

I had one young girl ring me up, “can you take me to McDonalds please, in the car, I’ll wear PPE” or whatever she had to do, she just wants to get out of the house! They’re bored and especially, I think the worst thing that happened was those kids that we had in schools and colleges and we had one with a job, that was a massive knock because you’ve just lost the structure, then there was the pull back in from the exploiters and the exploitation started again. (Interview, Site D)

As the last quote implies, the lack of opportunities and routine (i.e., schooling) for young people was frequently cited by practitioners alongside their concerns of the significant increase in, or risk of, exploitation. As one practitioner perceived, lockdown measures had: *“enabled potentially some increase in grooming, [with] perpetrators stepping into that space and obviously stepping in where there’s no schooling”* (Interview, Site B).

Despite practitioners suggesting that referrals had dropped during this time, across sites, practitioners reported that there had been a significant increase in children and young people being exploited through county lines; and that the nature and context of this harm had also shifted. Practitioners repeatedly told us that the restriction of transport links had impacted ‘county’ lines, with a clear shift instead to ‘local lines’ being evident:

So initially in that lockdown period there was more drug dealing in our car parks by our supermarkets than where previously they would be in other public spaces, so where the public moved to ... we saw those shifts too. (Interview, Site B)

The quote above echoed what practitioners had to say across sites. At the same time, practitioners noted that young girls seemed to be particularly targeted, with exploiters able to *“make them look as though they fit the care worker role”* (Focus Group, Site B), and therefore less likely to be stopped by the police.

Overall, the perceptions of practitioners across the sites were largely that grooming had increased (or “escalated”, as referred to by practitioners) during this time. What is currently unclear however, is whether or not criminal exploitation had increased, or whether *“it’s just stood out more”* (Interview, Site D) because of the Covid-19 measures, as will be explored in the following sub-section.

1.4. Ability to Identify - increased visibility

While social workers observed that the majority of young people were staying at home during this time, for those that did spend time outside the home, practitioners suggested that lockdown measures increased the visibility of EFH. For example, in one site, a practitioner stated that a hotspot for harmful sexual behaviour was identified much sooner, due to the fact that the young people involved *“weren’t meant to be out”* (Interview, Site C). At the same time, practitioners suggested that this increased visibility of young people spotlighted concerns that may not have been identified otherwise, with *“the absence of people in the area [enabling] probably some stuff that was already bubbling over to be much more visible”* (Interview, Site B).

The following quote exemplifies the complexity of the situation within which practitioners were working during this time.

I think there's still exploitation there because at the start I was thinking, "Oh this might give us a bit of a break [due to covid 'stay at home' restrictions] ... but it didn't have that impact, it very much was still apparent that young people were still at risk of exploitation and in some ways they were more visible and then in other ways it becomes a lot more difficult to, even though they're more visible it becomes a lot more difficult to support them and move forward. (Interview, Site C)

As this quote reflects, while young people's risk of extra-familial harm was, in some ways, becoming more visible; this did not necessarily equate to being able to adequately support young people in those spaces. This reflects anxieties voiced by practitioners across the sites and is explored in the following sub-section.

1.5. Loss of access to protective people and contexts (peers, professionals, and community guardians)

Whilst the visibility of young people enabled identification of EFH, across sites a repeated barrier to identification was the disappearance of supportive and protective adults in public spaces, and/or spaces where young people spend their time. As one professional stated, "*those eyes and ears that we had on the ground have disappeared*" (Focus Group, Site B).

In particular, there was a clear sense of anxiety about the closure of schools, restricting young people's access to that protective space, and the support from staff and students within it. As one practitioner noted:

We've fielded a lot of conversations with very, very anxious staff members in school who are unable to make contact with children, whose parents have been very hostile to them in trying to contact, and have not been able to keep up the very strong relationships they have with some of those children and it's created a huge amount of anxiety and high levels of concern. (Focus Group, Site B)

Practitioners voiced concern about the impact of peer support that had been diminished during this time. In particular, reiterating concerns from previous research³ that suggests that, along with parents, young people are most likely to disclose harm to their peers:

Yeah, and there's also that absolute importance of peer groups and friendships for young people, to suddenly have that taken away from them I think has been really difficult, and as we've said, a lot of young people did carry on going out and seeing their friends, and there's ways to communicate online and stuff but that's a bit different, so I think there's been quite a significant impact in terms of that. (Focus Group, Site A)

What we have heard from practitioners' observations then, is that during lockdown, there were several things going on for young people: that in most instances, young people stayed at home with their families; that not being able to see peers took away

³ Lloyd, J., Walker, J., Bradbury, V. (2020) Harmful sexual behaviour in schools: a briefing on the findings, implications and resources for schools and multi-agency partners. Luton: University of Bedfordshire. Available at: <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/media/elsc0mc3/beyond-referrals-two-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools.pdf>

a vital form of support for them; and that when young people *did* go out and see their peers during lockdown, this also, at times, came with rising tensions and a source of risk for EFH, such as violence between peers.

At the same time, practitioners predicted that lockdown increased young people's online activity, and there was a shared concern that professionals were not able to identify when or if exploitation was happening in these spaces. While this is an issue that is not limited to Covid-19; practitioners shared that the inability to identify when it was happening was exacerbated by Covid-19, with the usual referrers no longer being in those spaces to report concerns when they hear them. Practitioners told us that, prior to lockdown, they relied mostly on schools to refer concerns to children's social care around online exploitation or harm (i.e., peers or students might disclose what is happening to teachers, or teachers might overhear; parents might share what they've heard from their children to school staff; teachers might pick up screenshots sent around the school, and so on). With the closure of schools, this closed-down an avenue for picking these concerns up.

While practitioners were concerned about the closure of schools, youth clubs, and other public services for the support that young people could receive; practitioners also shared the protective factor that community guardians and families had played as a source of safety during this time. As one practitioner reflected, Covid-19 restrictions had made them realise "*...how many of these children actually rely on those, the adults in those settings who are able to provide them with that comfort and that love*" (Focus Group, Site B).

The following section will unpack some of these complexities, with a greater focus on the impact that Covid-19 has had on the ability to respond to extra-familial harm.

2. The ability to respond

Several challenges were raised across sites about the ability to respond to extra-familial harm during the pandemic. Practitioners shared that there were specific challenges around responding to certain types of harm over others – for example, Child Criminal Exploitation, Child Sexual Exploitation and Harmful Sexual Behaviour, were raised as particularly challenging. Lockdown measures prevented practitioners and the general public from being a presence in protective spaces for young people, and particular challenges are outlined in the following section regarding this.

2.1. Engaging with Young People

Practitioners highlighted significant positive practice that emerged during this time. The closure of meeting spaces/public offices etc., meant that practitioners met with young people in spaces comfortable for them. Whether that was, for example, going for walks, trips to McDonalds, or generally meeting with young people in places of their choice.

Where practitioners were not able to meet young people in-person, online or telephone calls were used instead. Generally, practitioners suggested that they had been better able to engage with young people over online platforms. Practitioners relayed that,

generally, young people were pleased that professionals had “*opened up their eyes to the virtual world*” (Interview, Site E). It is important to note, however, that particular challenges were experienced by practitioners around engaging with young people (both online, and offline) who have experienced sexual and/or criminal exploitation:

The other thing to consider, none of them wanted to go on video, the CSE girls that are in the CSE cohort, don't want to see themselves on video because obviously there's already self-image stuff, self-identity stuff, self-worth matters and the boys that are criminal are definitely not wanting to go on any kind of FaceTime or anything like that. The other thing to be mindful of with the boys or the criminal was we have no idea who they're with when they're taking their phone call from us, we have no idea where they are in Britain. (Interview, Site D)

Moreover, while online platforms opened some avenues for better engagement, practitioners also echoed the challenges of relationship-building at a distance (in place of in-person meetings). Particularly that trust-building and more relational ways of working were dampened by the formalities of online or telephone calls. As one practitioner suggested, “*...trying to build a relationship over Zoom or the telephone is not ideal.*” (Focus Group, Site B).

2.2. Resources

Practitioners across sites consistently voiced the impacts of austerity preceding Covid-19 that had been exacerbated during the pandemic. The closure of youth centres, schools, and other VCS services available to young people - along with resources in the multi-agency partnership being diverted from “mainstream” work to focus on lockdown measures - produced significant anxiety for practitioners about how they could support young people and intervene in contexts of harm with the lack of resources and support available. As one practitioner shared:

... I remember our first [meeting] into lockdown, it was almost a bit like, “What can we do because we just don't have the resources right now to be able to tackle anything?”, it was that sense of, “Hang on, schools have closed”, the police did not have the resources to be able to deploy to the areas that we had identified, we knew that they were trying not to arrest people because there were really strict rules about them taking young people into custody, well taking anybody into custody, so when it all very, very first started it was a bit like, “Crikey, how are we going to cope with this?”, and, “How are we going to deal with it?” (Focus Group, Site A)

Practitioners reported concerns that decisions were being made due to financial pressure, over and above the safety of young people. Interventions had to be paused or stopped due to Covid-19, creating anxiety that funding would not be renewed due to not “hitting targets”. As one practitioner stated,

I would say it's [Covid-19] a massive detrimental effect on the criminal exploitation cohort and our progress. My fear is decisions are being made over finances, over the next two months, on whether this team extends and if we judge it on the second year figures, we've not hit any targets that we should have which is really frustrating. (Interview, Site D)

More broadly, this raises some critical questions for Contextual Safeguarding and outcome measurement, and to what degree safety can be measured through such targets.

2.3. Partnerships

These concerns were compounded by the fact that little, to no, youth services were open during this time, highlighting the difficulty in providing packages of support for young people. Not only did the closure of agencies provide young people less access to protective spaces, but Covid-19 measures also restricted the ability for practitioners to enter, or be a presence in, contexts where young people might experience harm. The lack of protective adults outside of families produced significant anxiety for the practitioners we spoke to about how to intervene in these extra-familial contexts. As one practitioner stated:

I think what it's made me realise is just how important it is for these children to have stuff around, support services around them and just how quickly people can get in, if they're not. And, I think it's that, I don't, it feels, I just feel like there are a lot of invisible dangerous adults around these children that we just cannot even start to imagine who they are or where they are. (Site B, Focus Group)

Because I suppose people that are targeting young people know that there's less professionals around. (Site C, Interview)

Moreover, practitioners shared that Covid-19 impacted the number of placements available for young people in care, meaning that young people were placed together that normally wouldn't be, with practitioners concerned about the increased vulnerability in these contexts. Covid-19 restrictions also meant that practitioners were not able to enter young people's placements.

While this highlighted barriers on entering, or being a presence, in extra-familial contexts, practitioners shared positive observations/experiences of multi-agency partnership work during this time. Firstly, practitioners generally reported positive multi-agency partnership working, suggesting that virtual meetings have provided teams to mobilise themselves quickly in response to EFH; communicate more regularly, and be able to identify and respond to trends more readily than pre-pandemic. Secondly, some sites suggested that the pandemic provided an opportunity to challenge and work with police and community safety teams, to understand and respond to young people's behaviour through welfare-led responses, rather than punishment:

But we did quite a lot of work with our Comms department and the police, so we sent out some kind of police briefings jointly as a local authority and police just to say, "You can still report young people missing if they are missing, please don't feel that you can't. We want to make sure that young people are safe. There won't be any pushback in terms of lockdown, you won't be prosecuted, more than anything we want young people to be safe", so we did some of that, there was quite a concerted effort around that. (FG, Site A)

Whilst this highlights the opportunity of partnership working, it is important to highlight the difficulty that was also voiced by practitioners regarding the "*clash of cultures, organisational cultures going on*" (Interview, Site D). Whilst some sites were able to promote welfare-led and strong partnership responses between children's social care and the police, others highlighted particular challenges around inconsistency between partners on what constitutes harm, and subsequently the impact that has on how harm is responded to.

I would say different police forces are at different stages and because our lads are found outside of [Local Authority Area], you're dealing with police forces that sometimes don't even know what an NRM is, they don't even consider that the child's been exploited, they just see the child as a drug dealer and there needs to be some national wake-up on it. (Site D, Interview)

Practitioners suggested that partners need to have a trauma-informed response to young people's behaviour, understanding their behaviour within the context of vulnerability, trauma and welfare, and the trauma that might have resulted from the experience of living through a pandemic:

And, we're talking about that trauma-informed approach but when you've got young people who have experienced high levels of trauma and are going to be acting out behaviourally in potentially quite dangerous ways, they will start to be excluded because schools will feel they can't hold on to it and that's when we're going to end up in that cycle of behaviour again where we're going to have children who are not in school who should be, we know where they're going to go. So, yeah, it's a real worry. (Site B Focus Group)

Concerns were raised by practitioners around the punitive measures around young people's experiences of harm, that were compounded by increased police power during this time (not having the same Covid practice restrictions as other agencies); and the extent to which The Coronavirus Act 2020 legitimised punitive responses to young people, with the introduction of increased powers for the police to stop, arrest and detain individuals who were not complying to lockdown guidance. On increased stop and searches and arrests, one practitioner suggested:

This [lockdown period] has also coincided with the [redacted] awarding [redacted] a hell of a lot of money for county lines, so there's been four main police operations going on during this time, so that also would account for the fact that we are getting more arrests/stop checks because there's extra resourcing for the police as well. It's difficult to say, is this just lockdown and COVID restrictions or is this because we've had these additional resources for police operations? That's a bit unknown at the moment as the true reason. (Site D, Interview)

The other side of it is obviously the police haven't changed at all since lockdown, they have no restrictions on them whatsoever and so you've got a clash of cultures, organisational cultures going on, so the police have been going out, doing their police business, doing home visits but in terms of the disruption side, they've actually had an [inaudible 00:17:35] operation running during lockdown in terms of them going out physically on a Friday night and doing stuff. (Site D, Interview)

Practitioners shared a collective discomfort about the punitive impact that Covid-19 restrictions were having on the ability to safeguard young people, an issue that extended beyond the police, and is elaborated below.

2.4. Government Guidance

The challenge of responding to EFH seemed to be conflated by inconsistent and confusing guidance from the government about Covid-19 restrictions. Practitioners reported that the lack of communication from government to local authority's meant that they often heard the changes in the guidance in the news first, having no time to prepare and report on changes to practice. Practitioners particularly noted the

challenge of communicating the ever-changing guidance to young people and their families; especially young people with special educational needs.

I remember the team going to us, “The guidance, you keep changing your guidance”, and it was like, “Well the guidance is changing before our eyes”, and I remember us having a conversation, “We are trying to keep up as quickly as we can”, and we’d put something out in the morning and then by the afternoon it had changed, but there you go, it was challenging I think. (Focus Group, Site A)

We did pieces of work where we were trying to get guidance out to young people, and we got our speech and language therapist to make sure it was young person friendly and in terms of different learning needs it met those so it was really clear, and then it literally changed before your eyes. (Focus Group, Site A)

Finally, across the sites the practitioners we spoke to noted particular concerns about how the guidance was leading to punitive and negative perceptions of adolescent young people from local communities. Multiple examples were highlighted by practitioners:

R1: I don't know if this counts into this bit but at the time of the lockdown a lot of teenagers were getting bad press about not complying with it because people were seeing groups of teenagers out, shaking their fists about the teenagers, and I think maybe that's carried on a little bit as well.

R2: Certainly I've see things on Facebook and stuff which kind of makes my blood boil really, about, “Teenagers don't care. Teenagers are spreading it”, and it's like, “Hang on, shall we talk about the pubs being open?” (Focus Group, Site A)

It's been a really difficult time for them [young people]. Now we're starting to come out of it and we're seeing more young people spending time together, I do feel like they're getting a really rough deal in regards to how people are viewing them in the community. So, for instance, we get, we've got on social media platforms they'll have group pages for certain areas and quite often if there's been groups of young people there'll be you know posts to suggest that there's been loads of young people together, they're breaking COVID rules, they're having a massive impact on the community as a whole. So, I think they get a very bad rep, young people. (Interview, Site C)

This reflects concerns shared by Dr Lauren Wroe⁴ at the time regarding the Coronavirus Act increasing surveillance of young people due to concerns about 'breaking rules', rather than understanding young people through their needs and rights.

Moreover, in one site, a Youth Justice team manager shared how Covid restrictions meant that, when young people were arrested by the police and charged to appear in court, there was no option for young people to have face-to-face contact while in custody. The YOT court officer would have to ring them through a phone bridged to

⁴ Wroe, L. (2022) Safeguarding, adolescents and Coronavirus – Contextual Safeguarding during lockdown, Contextual Safeguarding Blog, 31st March 2020, Available at: <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/blog/safeguarding-adolescents-and-coronavirus-contextual-safeguarding-during-lockdown/> [Accessed 10 Oct 2022]

their cell to check they were okay; and when they had to appear in court this was via a video link. Reflecting on this, the practitioner shared that *“It’s really hard to communicate with the young person in the police station and do that assessment that you need to do and check that they’re okay, it’s really difficult. ... It’s really not a good way to communicate with young people.”* (Focus Group B).

In the focus groups, a shared concern was voiced that, although Covid restrictions impacted all young people, they had exacerbated inequalities for young people where a trauma-informed and care-full response was required, but was lacking:

R1: And, I feel like, because I know you asked us about what’s worked well, but for me, I genuinely feel like there needs to be an acknowledgement that actually this hasn’t worked well and that the most vulnerable group has essentially been left, because they have. You know okay we talk about the children that could get to go to school, we knew, half of our children weren’t even in education anyway! And, there’s been very little care for them. What there has been is there’s been a lot of acknowledgment of how difficult it is for adults and definitely something I’ve noticed, the adults aren’t coping so when the children then act up because the adults aren’t coping, there’s been no consideration for what might be happening there. Then things are breaking down, there’s escalation in offending and there’s not been much of a, “Oh, let’s try and think about this, let’s try and understand what’s perhaps going on for that child”, it’s just very much their behaviour is, and I feel like in a way we’ve gone a bit punitive with that, you know and ... I think what I worry about is the human rights of those children and I think that they have, you know...

R2: *The conditions are not conducive.*

R1: *Yeah, no.*

R2: *The context is not conducive.* (Focus Group, Site B)

2.5. Young people’s right to privacy

Due to COVID-19 guidance around social distancing, practice had largely shifted to the virtual world during this period: for example, delivering conferences, multi-agency meetings, and one-to-one meetings with young people online. Practitioners highlighted concerns around how to maintain professional, family, and young people’s privacy over these online spaces. This raised particular questions around what this meant for, for example, young people being unable to discuss personal and sensitive issues whilst having family/carers present; and, practitioners dealing with sensitive issues over the computer in their own personal space.

At the same time practitioners reflected that, while steps were taken to mitigate this, not having private meeting spaces or indoor places to meet meant that young people were at risk of discussing or disclosing highly sensitive issues in spaces where they could be overheard (i.e. in a garden, in front of other family members, etc.):

R1: *Yeah, so that’s difficult anyway, obviously some people did engage really well with it and were able to do it, so as the situation continued, so some stuff was tried online, then we started meeting in peoples’ gardens and stuff, but again a lot of people don’t have a garden or an appropriate space to be able to talk about the kind of things we need to talk about, and where we used to meet them people, and we were always stretched for rooms anyway, but we did have a space in our county hall*

office where we would see young people downstairs, we weren't allowed to go in there at points, and young people with garden space meant that their neighbours could be hearing everything you were talking about, so that did present quite a challenge actually.

R2: And even doing it on Teams, because everyone was at home, is there a space in that house, a quiet space, or Facebook Messenger, to be able to have those conversations without the rest of the family hearing or distracting, that was a challenge I think for some. (Focus Group, Site A)

Related to this, there was an inconsistency across sites regarding what platforms practitioners could use to contact young people. For example, some sites were restricted from using WhatsApp, but were able to set up professional Facebook Messenger work profiles; whereas others were only permitted to contact young people via calls or text messages.

Similarly, significant concerns were raised across sites on GDPR laws and the ability to respond to online exploitation. Practitioners consistently raised concerns that exploiters were being “opportunistic” with grooming young people online, due to the law preventing professional’s access to the online space.

... this is where the law prevents us from doing things, so like things like GDPR and the Freedom of Information and all that mean that we don't have Snapchat accounts, we don't have you know all the social media and for police to access them, there's a process that they have to go through in order to access them and by the time they get there, that's all been deleted and I think the only thing we can rely on is people seeing the things, taking a screenshot, taking a shot of the video, I think that is something that we have to think about when we're talking about contextual safeguarding is that I think we are behind with social media. And, I think as a result of that, we are then being exploited in the sense that they're exploiting the fact that the professionals around those children can't access it. (Focus Group, Site B)

While this wasn't discussed by practitioners, the reflections and concerns raised here regarding online monitoring of young people raise wider critical questions about how to do *contextual* safeguarding in online spaces that does not negate young people's right to privacy. For example, by engaging social media platform regulators as safeguarding partners, or increasing visible guardianship capacity in online spaces, rather than professionals creating online profiles to that *watch over*⁵ young people.

Conclusion: Covid-19 and Contextual Safeguarding

This Briefing has highlighted the significant implications that Covid-19 had on the ability to identify and respond to extra-familial harm. We engaged practitioners who were involved in piloting Contextual Safeguarding in interviews and focus groups to hear their thoughts about the impact of Covid-19. Overall, 'level one' pilot work, that is work focused on supporting individual young people but where interventions aim to

⁵ [Social Sciences | Free Full-Text | Watching over or Working with? Understanding Social Work Innovation in Response to Extra-Familial Harm \(mdpi.com\)](#)

impact the contexts relevant to the specific child, had adapted with Covid-19 restrictions. Assessments continued to be 'contextualised' (i.e., by asking questions about friends and spaces), consultations and meetings moved online, and one-to-one work took place when appropriate. However, 'level two' work, where the focus is on assessing and intervening with contexts - i.e., locations or groups - was more challenging under the restrictions. There were delays to carrying out 'location' and 'school assessments' because lockdown restricted physical access to those spaces and places; there was less ability to identify or bring community guardians into these spaces; and less access to interventions that could effectively address harmful contexts harm due to reduced access.

Despite this period of instability and uncertainty, the participating Scale Up sites had done an excellent job in working towards more contextual ways of working. Reflecting on the interviews and wider work within the Scale Up pilots, we have heard practitioners be advocates for young people – calling for young people's rights, needs and welfare/wellbeing to be upheld above and beyond punitive and behaviour-led responses. At the same time, this period of uncertainty seemed to allow space for practitioners to be more deeply reflexive of, and voice, the intersection of systemic harm and inequalities. The ways in which, for example, austerity exacerbated inequality and the difficulty to respond to EFH; or, how responses to young people's presenting behaviour (both from community residents and other statutory services) had been punitive and stigmatising, with little consideration for their adolescent development, needs, or the impact of trauma.

While it has now been some time since Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, this briefing has highlighted wider observations that have significance for how we respond to extra-familial risk more generally. Namely:

- How we safeguard young people in online spaces while upholding young people's right to privacy by engaging social media regulators as partners and increasing visible guardianship in online spaces;
- How the nature of extra-familial harm adapts – groomers/exploiters are knowledgeable about the context of young people's lives and adapt to that (i.e. 'County Lines' to 'Local Lines');
- How we measure outcomes contextually, while also recognising the influence of funding and resource requirements that prescribe hitting (often individualised) 'targets';
- How to hold on to some of the flexibility that was afforded during Covid-19 to work in new and creative ways (i.e., meeting young people in spaces that suit them);
- How, in some instances, the lack of statutory intervention available due to the restrictions allowed young people, families, and communities to have the agency and space to support and care for one another in safe-making ways, with multi-agency services being there at a distance for additional support if needed.

This last point is perhaps the most pertinent to end this briefing on. Observations of multi-agency working during this time highlighted that Covid-19 had allowed some introspection to - and re-shifting of - the power dynamics between statutory and multi-agency services, and young people, families, and communities. As observed in the data, there were capacity limits to the interventions that statutory and multi-agency

services could provide. This meant that the role of statutory services had to change in ways that *supported*, rather than ‘intervened’ in young people’s lives; requiring both trust and relationality that communities can and do support themselves when given the space and support to do so.

In this ‘post’-Covid era, these insights are important and allow us to have a way of thinking critically about the basis on which the state (over-)intervenes in the private lives of people, and its role and impact. We have seen the positive role that practitioners play in this regard, where spaces were made for practitioners to support each other collectively to challenge the limits of the system – to think and act relationally, systemically, and contextually. Responses to EFH were decided through a caring and ethical lens that put young people and their family’s best interests and needs at the centre; uplifting the values and principles that inform a Contextual Safeguarding approach.