Learning Project 3:
Holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents

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HOLSITIC APPROACHES TO SAFEGUARDING ADOLESCENTS

Purpose

This briefing shares findings from the Contextual Safeguarding Network's third learning project exploring how local areas are developing holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents from extra-familial risk. Holistic approaches are understood as coordinated strategic approaches that move beyond siloed responses to specific risks, such as child sexual exploitation (CSE), youth violence, criminal exploitation or teenage relationship abuse and develop overarching responses by joining meeting structures, assessments and interventions.

The Contextual Safeguarding toolkit, which will be published on the [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#) in March 2019, will provide more exemplars of holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents, including multi-agency extra-familial risk meeting protocols and templates. If any network members has any examples of holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents they would like to share, please get in touch with delphine.peace@beds.ac.uk

Evidence base

This learning project was informed by:

- Responses to the Contextual Safeguarding Network's third learning project research questions. Nine network members from the following sectors submitted responses: education, health, social care, policing, local safeguarding children's board, and voluntary;
- Group discussion held at the Contextual Safeguarding Learning event - 'Holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents' on the 31st of October 2017, which was attended by over 80 practitioners from across sectors;
- The results of a survey carried out in 2017 for the London Safeguarding Adolescents Group to capture London-based professionals' views on safeguarding adolescents (LSASG survey);

- Three phone interviews with local authority representatives and one phone interview with a youth charity representative;
- Seven site visits conducted by members of the Contextual Safeguarding team to learn from existing regional and national examples of applying contextual and holistic approaches to safeguarding.

Background

For the purpose of this briefing, an adolescent is broadly defined as a young person aged between 10 and 18 years old. It is recognised that some services work with young people aged up to 25 including Youth Offending Teams or teams working with young people with special educational needs.

There is increasing concern about serious risks faced by young people during adolescence and the shortcoming of the current UK child protection system in identifying and responding to these risks (Coleman, 2011; Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Sidebotham et al., 2016; Firmin, 2018). Hanson and Holmes (2014), in an evidence scoping on serious risks faced by young people in the UK, classify the risks they found to be most distinctive within adolescence, in terms of prevalence or impact, into the following child protection categories: Sexual abuse (such as sexual abuse or exploitation by gangs, groups or peers, online abuse or intra-familial abuse); Physical abuse (such as gang-related and community violence or intimate relationship violence); Neglect (from family members or in custody) and Emotional Abuse (from family members, extensive bullying from peers and/or online or from intimate partners). Further forms of risks were identified that did not fit within any child protection categories: homelessness, self-harm, substance misuse and 'gang-involvement' (Hanson and Holmes, 2014: 6). The evidence scoping emphasises that risks faced by young people during adolescence are more complex and wide-ranging than those faced by younger children and that young people during adolescence are more likely to be victims of multiple forms of risks. Young people going missing, for instance, or young people involved with 'gangs' (or criminally exploited groups) are more likely to experience forms of physical violence and/or sexual violence (Becket et al., 2013; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015).

The risks young people face during adolescence, compare with those faced by younger children, are also more likely to be situated outside of the home environment and in public places where young people socialise (Berelowitz et al. 2012; Beckett et al., 2013; Firmin, 2013). Safety in public spaces and the relationships that young people form in these settings are often beyond the control of parents or carers. As such, many forms of extra-familial risk involve a loss of parental control. Gang-association, criminal and sexual exploitation, for example, can involve a process of grooming that often purposely undermines family relationships.

Peer influence is another distinctive aspect of risks faced by young people in adolescence. Peer groups and relationships play a significant role during adolescence in shaping young people's social norms and the decisions they make (Warr, 2002; Coleman, 2011) and can become settings in which abuse and exploitation occur, as illustrated by growing evidence on significant levels of abuse between young people within peer groups or intimate relationships in schools and in public places (Barter et al., 2009; Radford et al., 2011; Ringrose et al., 2011; Hackett, 2014; BBC, 2015; Firmin, 2017a). By focusing predominantly on the family setting from assessment through to intervention, many safeguarding responses miss crucial opportunities to holistically respond to adolescents' experiences of harm within public spaces or peer groups. Factors which are particularly pertinent in issues such as CSE, missing or trafficking can be overlooked when these issues are addressed in silo. In order to address this common gap, local authorities are increasingly moving away from siloed responses to specific forms of risks (like CSE, missing or trafficking) and developing strategic and operational meetings that respond holistically to these different forms of risk.

The first part of this briefing shares strategic and operational holistic methods for safeguarding young people during adolescence. The second part discusses challenges faced by local authorities and practitioners when addressing different forms of abuse during adolescence that would benefit from a holistic response model. It is worth noting that this briefing only considers challenges and practice examples identified as part of

this learning project. It is therefore limited in scope and does not address some other key elements of holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents such as safeguarding adolescents from online abuse, whole-school safeguarding approaches, different approaches to supporting parents, carers and siblings and the need to work with business and community contexts.[1]

Findings

1. Strategic and operational holistic methods for safeguarding adolescents

This section shares strategic and operational examples of how local authorities have developed holistic approaches to safeguarding young people during adolescence.

a. *Re-framing understandings of risks and vulnerabilities during adolescence to consider all forms of exploitation*

Local authorities that participated in this learning project recognise the need to move beyond responding to forms of adolescent risk in silo and understand wider forms of risk and how these interplay. A number of local authorities are reviewing meeting structures, policy and use of language more broadly to consider all forms of exploitation. Illustrating this shift, some extended their child sexual exploitation strategies to multi-agency strategies, focusing on adolescent exploitation and abuse, or have merged issue-specific meetings together. A few participants to this learning project, for instance, have a dedicated CSE & Missing Coordinator and Analyst or a Child Criminal Exploitation Coordinator. Safeguarding Children Boards, Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Meetings (MACE) or Risk Management meetings provide a platform for addressing extra-familial risks. Several local authorities have also set up teams or panels specifically to safeguard vulnerable adolescents (examples of such panels are outlined in sections 1b and 1c below).

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[1] For more on working with business and communities, see the Contextual Safeguarding Network's fourth learning project on responding to safeguarding concerns in local businesses and neighborhoods

Multi-agency partnerships to tackle organised crime

A local authority set up a multi-agency partnership team to tackle organised crime. The team supports young people by reviewing, preventing and disrupting their pathways into criminal exploitation. Young people are offered mentoring, educational psychologist services and targeted support. This team, a practitioner observed, proved particularly valuable in creating a space in which young men can be 'discussed as vulnerable people' within the context of drug trafficking or 'county lines', particularly with regards to CSE. This practitioner felt this approach was key as the majority of services for young people who have experienced CSE target girls or young women, while boys or young men tend to be overlooked as actual or potential victims of CSE. This same practitioner further reflected on the value of these spaces in helping professionals understand the link between different types of exploitation and the permeability between victimhood and perpetration.

Integrating services

A youth charity commissioned by their local council to deliver services supporting vulnerable young people integrated its CSE and Missing services, the latter previously held by the council's Youth Justice service. The representative of this charity reported that joining up this work has been very successful and explained that the integrated CSE and Missing service fed into a newly established Strategic Young Person Exploitation Board. This initiative was facilitated by good established relationships with key council services.

This charity is further considering the possibility of integrating their council's Youth Justice multi-agency work with young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) into the joint CSE and Missing service due to the complexity of cases going through the HSB panel. According to the charity's representative, pathways of HSB for young women are usually referred to CSE services whereas consideration to safeguarding concerns in the presenting factors of HSB for young men tend to be overlooked. Combining the HSB responses with the CSE and Missing responses would ensure the charity has the correct pathways to identify thresholds for young people to access the

right services. The charity's community youth teams, consisting of youth workers, prevention workers and career advisers for young people, currently plays a key role in identifying young people coming through the HSB pathway that don't necessarily meet the threshold.

The joint CSE and Missing service works alongside Multi-Agency Support teams, CAMHS, and the council's Organised Crime Team, which comprises an enforcement strand, led by the police, and an intervention team with social workers, prevention workers, youth workers and a range of agencies such as Education, Health and Housing.

b. *Vulnerable adolescent panels*

A number of local authorities set up specific teams or multi-agency panels with a wide representation of agencies to hold strategic oversight of vulnerable adolescents, allowing for overlaps between a range of vulnerabilities and risks to be discussed and responded to within a holistic, partnership approach. Issues addressed in these adolescent panels include young people who are missing from home, care and/or education; homelessness; criminal exploitation (including sexual exploitation, exploitation through gangs and drugs or radicalisation); youth offending or youth violent and/or harmful sexual behaviour.

These adolescent panels were developed by widening issue-specific meetings such as CSE or Missing to other risks and vulnerabilities or by joining up historically separated meetings. Participants all insisted on the importance of data sharing and partnership working. Intelligence shared from key partners, including Community Safety, Youth Work, the Police, Youth Offending Services, Integrated Gang Units, Education, Health, Early Help and key agencies, such as Housing, informs assessments and intervention planning.

Joint interventions

Through the joint review of cases, one panel has identified that rising numbers of exclusions from schools were increasing the vulnerability of some adolescents and work is underway supporting schools at an earlier stage to intervene before exclusion. Another adolescent team, dealing with cases of criminal exploitation, serious youth violence and CSE, is working with Community Safety to target hotspots through location-based interventions such as increasing CCTV or identifying and clearing derelict buildings.

c. Multi-agency mapping and analysis

Several local authorities use specific methods of mapping and analysis to gather intelligence, understand how risks interrelate, and plan interventions targeting peer groups and public places. A local authority, as part of its Adolescent Vulnerability and Risk Meeting, undertook a city wide mapping in relation to child criminal exploitation, intending to create an electronic city map identifying hotspot areas and the young people associated with these locations. A number of local authority strategy meetings, furthermore, are focusing on group dynamics and using peer mapping as part of their assessment process and to inform reflective supervision. One of the Vulnerable Adolescent panels observed as part of this learning project created a 'Vulnerable Adolescents Analyst' post supporting the panel to understand data systems from a variety of sources to identify vulnerable young people and coordinate interventions across the partnership.

Identifying and understanding exploitation risks to inform joint assessments and early interventions

One local authority set up a multi-agency task force that jointly tackles complex cases of extra-familial risk. This task force comprised of 14 key agencies and conducted a range of activities including geo-mapping of agencies' data to identify hotspots requiring joint agency interventions and peer-group analysis via visual network charts to aid identification and assessment of safeguarding risk for young people involved with criminal groups.

Added analytic capacity has been invaluable to helping professionals understand and map out wider exploitation risks and how these interrelate. In addition to setting up a multi-agency task-force group to address high-risk cases, this same local authority created a Family Support Panel to support the parents and siblings of young people involved in criminally exploited groups as part of this council's multi-agency initiative. Qualitative data from these multi-agency Family Support Panels were used to enhance understanding of grooming mechanisms and gang tactics. This has generated new understanding of exploitation tactics and identified better opportunities for early intervention. Building upon this knowledge, the task force team delivered a range of certified training sessions across the county designed to raise awareness of issues, improve the sharing of safeguarding information between agencies and enhance effective joint assessment of threat, risk, and harm.

d. Specialist adolescent service

A local authority who informed this learning project runs a specialist adolescent service comprising a Youth Offending Team, a tier 2/3 Substance Misuse and Teenage Pregnancy Service, a Functional Family Therapy Team, an Extended Adolescent Service providing support for young people around teenage pregnancy, sexual health and substance misuse, CAMHS, an educational psychologist and educational workers. Referrals are made to individual teams but staff work across the service to provide a comprehensive response to each young person's needs. A specialist adolescent 'pod' (or social work team) sits within this adolescent service operating on a reduced caseload to conduct intensive work on high-risk cases. The adolescent pod was developed out of the adolescent service's CSE team to tackle other forms of exploitation and follows a similar approach to the adolescent service: young people have a keyworker but pod workers are familiar with all cases and support each other through group supervision. This local authority also started using peer group mapping during group supervisions to identify overlaps between peer networks and locations and shares this information with the police to inform operations with licensed services.

2. Common challenges and practice examples related to holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents

This section outlines common challenges that holistic approaches are trying to address or practices they are trying to enhance that are relevant to a number of issues that emerge during adolescence

a. Lack of overarching strategy on safeguarding adolescents

A number of respondents expressed concerns about the extent to which child protection systems address the experience of young people during adolescence and felt that best practice around safeguarding adolescents is not always clear. One group of practitioners discussed, for instance, the need for national guidance outlining explicit and embedded procedures for protecting adolescents with the same focus and priority as a child protection case conference. Concerns around gaps in legislation and procedures, namely the lack of clarity around how best to safeguard adolescents from risk outside the home, is further reflected in the London Safeguarding Adolescents Group (LSASG) survey findings: respondent's confidence increasingly reduced as contexts of risk moved further away from the family to peer groups, neighbourhood and online settings (Shuker, 2017). Child protection structures appear to work better for younger children or young people abused within families and there is a clear need for an overarching strategic position or guidance on safeguarding adolescents that addresses the limitations of the existing child protection system.

Considering extra-familial risk in assessment frameworks

Some local authorities revisited their assessment framework to better consider extra-familial risks faced by adolescents, supporting social care practitioners in identifying peer groups and associates, locations and spaces where young people spend time, and the locations of serious incidents of youth violence.

Safeguarding conferences based on specific locations

One local authority has addressed risks in a specific location by holding a 'Context Protection Conference': the conference was structured according to a traditional child protection conference, but instead of focusing on a child, the subject of the conference was the location. The aim was to provide a coordinated multi-agency response addressing the risks to vulnerable adolescents in this specific location thereby reducing the risks to a larger cohort of young people and the wider community.

Findings from the LSASG survey further highlight the need for safeguarding procedures to better consider adolescent autonomy (Shuker, 2017). This gap was also reflected in discussions among respondents on the need to better understand adolescent agency, risks and choices. Several practitioners observed that young people are often seen as responsible for making 'risky choices' outside the home. This resonates with findings from Hanson and Holmes (2014)' evidence scoping on responding to risks in adolescence, indicating that pathways leading to harm often involve adolescent choices, and that professionals can misinterpret these as rational and informed 'lifestyle choices', akin to that of adult decision-making, or 'difficult behaviour'. A respondent experienced in delivering safeguarding training to schools, for instance, explained their work with schools consisted of helping staff shift their focus from 'behavioral issues' to safeguarding concerns. Respondents' reflections on the challenge of identifying and responding to risks specific to adolescence echo findings from previous research: despite growing recognition of the complex picture of adolescent risk, and its distinctiveness to that of younger children, the child protection system still lacks a solid understanding of those risks and of how to address them (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; NSPCC, 2014).

b. *Safeguarding young people involved with criminally exploited groups*

Participants identified peer group dynamics as an important element of holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents and reflected on the challenges of carrying out peer group assessments. They flagged 'county lines' and associated criminal exploitation of young people as an evolving and expanding criminal practice and

stressed the challenge of disrupting organised crime. Whilst the understanding of peer group dynamics is increasingly seen as an integral part of safeguarding adolescents and is being used by a number of participants, many highlighted the difficulty of conducting assessments and interventions with peer groups considered as high-risk. A practitioner pointed to the lack of evidence-based interventions for high-risk groups and evaluated programmes in the UK. Another shared their difficulties engaging other professionals in peer group mapping with groups that do not always meet their local authority's policy definition of a 'gang' meaning that these groups are not recognised as a priority to other services.

Similarly, a participant raised the challenge of safeguarding adolescents who are recruited into criminally exploited groups, particularly those who do not come to the attention of Integrated Gang Units or Youth Offending Teams. They explained that the Integrated Gang Unit in their local authority only works with criminally exploited young people who have committed criminal offences. Other young people who may have committed serious offences but have not been arrested, or those who have not committed any offences, receive minimum interventions (and in many cases none at all). This is problematic as these young people may have harmed other young people or may be themselves subject to harm or exploitation. Failure to identify how multiple vulnerabilities may manifest themselves within wider dynamics of a group, and to acknowledge connections between victimhood and perpetration within these spaces, can lead to missed safeguarding opportunities. The same participant explained that not all young people who have come to the attention of Integrated Gang Units are referred to social care. While information from the Integrated Gang Unit is regularly shared with social care, it is focused on individuals and not incidents, offering little opportunities for concerns on environments and locations to be identified. This participant further observed that their Integrated Gang Unit consisted mostly of professionals with a policing background in Community Safety and 'lacked a safeguarding culture', pointing to the need of bridging the gaps between safeguarding and Community Safety within local authorities.

Identifying whether young people are criminally exploited within a gang context, or being recruited into one, is a key challenge faced by practitioners in social care. As one of them observed, referral forms frequently describe adolescents as being 'gang involved' or 'having gang links', while the extent of those links or the level of risk faced by adolescent remains unclear. Without a clear, consensual definition of what constitutes a 'gang', identifying and assessing risks associated with gang-activity proves challenging for many practitioners. Participants stressed the importance of distinguishing between gangs and groups of young people displaying anti-social behaviour as the vulnerabilities and risks that young people may face in these different contexts can vary. Incorrectly describing a young person as being part of a gang is stigmatising and can create anxiety for professionals and confusion as to what appropriate responses should be. Indeed, professionals should be mindful of conflating group criminal exploitation with gang-association.[2]

c. *Improving information sharing across agencies and partnerships that may be working to address siloed issues*

Siloed working and lack of information sharing were identified by a large number of respondents as additional barriers to holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents. It was observed, for example, that agencies' engagement and responses can be inconsistent: one practitioner identified this was sometimes true of the schools they worked with. Another practitioner indicated that child protection conferences offered very little opportunity for extra-familial information gathering. The importance of working with a range of agencies and 'getting the right people at the right meetings' allowing for multi-agency perspective and information to be shared was repeatedly emphasised. Participants insisted partnership working was crucial to building a better understanding of adolescent's experiences and interacting vulnerabilities and identifying trends and patterns. One local authority representative, for example, explained they were looking at how they can involve CSE and criminal exploitation police teams in their Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) to obtain better intelligence.

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[2] For a critical analysis of how the Gang Matrix is used in policing see StopWatch's recent report 'Being Matrixed: The (over)policing of gang suspects in London'

Lack of information sharing: Case study 1

A respondent spoke about the lack of opportunity for partnership working with the police when responding to extra-familial risks. This is because, where they worked, there are no single points of contacts within the police for incidents that take place outside of the home. Policing colleagues, for examples, can be situated within a child abuse investigation team, a CSE team, or within an Integrated Gang Unit, in addition to policing points of contacts in schools or neighbourhoods. This respondent shared a case where both a young man and his cousin had been stabbed; both incidents occurred a week apart and in the same location. The local authority traced the first respondent police officer and submitted an information request after the incident had been reported to them. According to this practitioner, it can take a number of days for information to be shared with local authorities about incidents that have occurred. This slow and arduous process prevents local authorities from having strategic discussions with the police to put interventions in place in a timely manner following incidents of significant youth violence.

Lack of information sharing between police forces and local authorities about young people that are arrested out of the borough or county they live in was also identified as a key challenge, further limiting the scope for social care interventions to be put in place.

Lack of information sharing: Case study 2

In another example shared to illustrate the challenge of siloed working in the police, an adolescent girl travelling alone late at night to a city in a rural area was picked up by the police. While the young girl did explain she was from London, the police failed to conduct checks in order to see if she was known to her local authority. It appeared days later that this young girl was Looked After and had gone missing in the past. By the time the local authority had been informed of the incident the young girl had gone missing again.

d. Engaging with young people and working with adolescent agency

Engaging with young people who are groomed into criminal activity can be a real challenge for social workers, the police, youth justice workers and mental health services and failure to do so can lead to missed safeguarding opportunities. Practitioners reiterated the importance of relationship-based practice and assertive outreach. Several participants, for instance, used social media to communicate young people. Allowing young people to meet on their own terms and in environments of their choice enables practitioners, as one participant explained, to 'build relationships in the first instance before being able to collaborate and create safety plans' with young people. The importance of relationships for safeguarding adolescents was also flagged in the LSASG survey findings. When asked for suggested changes to policies and practices for safeguarding adolescents, responses included making better use of the professional who has the best relationship with the child (Shuker, 2017).

Designing risk assessments and interventions with young people

Participatory methods were identified as an important element of holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents. A specialist team from the third sector redesigned its risk assessment process in consultation with young people to address risks in various contexts of their lives. Professionals in the team felt it was important to give young people ownership of their risk assessments. Using a similar approach, another local authority collaborated with young people to develop interventions and toolkits for their work with other adolescents. They asked young people to develop fictional characters that could be used as tools. The young people involved projected aspects of their own personalities and journeys on their fictional characters and later shared they had found this process therapeutic. Young people were also engaged in developing the tools of their own assessments and interventions, using strength-based approaches taking into account positive elements in their lives that they could build on. The practitioner who shared this example emphasised the importance of helping young people identify and develop their strengths even when some of their behaviours are perceived to be 'risky' or when they demonstrate certain vulnerabilities. These strength-based assessments

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developed with young people are used to steer discussions at the local authority's multi-agency planning meetings.

Thematic summary

Key themes and considerations for adopting holistic approaches to safeguarding adolescents were identified during this learning project:

- Developing overarching responses to multiple forms of risks and exploitation by joining meeting structures, assessments and interventions.
- Considering opportunities and fora for multi-agency partners to discuss and share information and intelligence relating to extra-familial contexts and overlapping vulnerabilities. This can be achieved, for example, through vulnerable adolescents panels, joint task forces or safeguarding conferences based on a particular location.
- Reviewing policies relating to safeguarding adolescents and considering process and procedures linked to extra-familial risks.
- Considering creating additional analytical capacity to map out and understand extra-familial risks, particularly in relation to locations and peer groups.
- Considering peer group mapping as an opportunity to explore the nature of young people's relationships and factors that might influence dynamics within the peer group. Peer group mapping and assessment guidance will be made available on the Contextual Safeguarding Implementation Toolkit in March 2019.
- Improving information sharing across and within agencies and partnerships that may be working to address siloed issues.
- Ensuring that young people who may be criminally exploited or at risk of being criminally exploited are provided with a safeguarding response. This includes refraining from any gendered stereotypes that might prevent the identification of young men being seen as potential victims of abuse.
- Reviewing training provided to practitioners to include extra-familial risk.
- Considering opportunities for peer support to improve practitioners' confidence and facilitate shared learning on identifying and responding to extra-familial risk.

- Ensuring risk assessments and interventions provide opportunities for adolescents' own views and perspectives to be reflected and provide greater detail relating to the contexts in which choices are made (such as dynamics within peer groups, safety and guardianship within places, or influence of exploitative relationships). The safety mapping tool can be used to help practitioners discuss local areas or risk and safety with young people. The safety mapping tool is accessible on the Contextual Safeguarding Network.

- Working with schools to review their behaviour and exclusion policies and what support is available to schools to facilitate early interventions. The assessment framework for harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) meetings can be used following identification of a number of peer-on-peer CSE cases in schools and NFA decisions by criminal justice. The assessment framework is accessible on the Contextual Safeguarding network.

- Developing trusting relationship with young people through use of assertive outreach approaches.

- Co-designing risk assessments and interventions with young people.

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